

**Renters (Reform) Bill: Second Reading (Commons) – 23 October 2023**

**HoC Debate: Renters (Reform) Bill**

*Second reading*

*[Relevant documents: Fifth Report of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, Reforming the Private Rented Sector, HC 624 and the Government response, HC 1935; Oral evidence taken before the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee on 10 July 2023, on Follow-up: Private rented sector report and the Renters (Reform) Bill, HC 1481; Correspondence between the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee and the Minister of State for Housing and Planning, on the Renters (Reform) Bill, reported to the House on 28 July 2023 and 11 September 2023; Correspondence from Shelter to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, on the Renters (Reform) Bill, reported to the House on 11 September 2023; Correspondence from the National Residential Landlords Association to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, on oral evidence given on 10 July 2023, reported to the House on 28 July 2023; Correspondence from the All Party Parliamentary Group on Students to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, on meeting on 5 May 2023 on Renters (Reform) Bill, reported to the House on 28 July 2023; Correspondence between the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, on the Renters (Reform) Bill and the private rented sector, reported to the House on 26 May 2023, 5 June 2023, 12 June 2023 and 10 July 2023; Correspondence from the British Property Federation to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, on the Renters (Reform) Bill, reported to the House on 12 June 2023; and, Correspondence from the Minister of State for Housing and Planning to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, on the Government response to the Committee's report on Reforming the Private Rented Sector, reported to the House on 17 April 2023.]*

**The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove)**: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Before I get into the detail of what the Bill allows for and the reforms that it portends, may I say a few words of thanks? In particular, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes). During his time at the Department, he was responsible for the White Paper that essentially did the groundwork for the Bill, but prior to working in the Department, he worked for a variety of third sector and voluntary organisations, helping the homeless and standing up for those in poor-quality housing. His foreword to the recent report by the Centre for Social Justice on the importance of reform in the private rented sector is both eloquent and effective. May I take this opportunity to thank him for his excellent work?

I also thank the Centre for Social Justice, which was founded by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) some time ago. The report that it has prepared makes a compelling case for reform in the private rented sector, in order to help those most in need. May I also thank those organisations, including Shelter and the National Residential Landlords Association, that have supported me and the Department in framing this legislation?

May I also thank the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee and its Chair, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), for the recommendations in its report on the need to reform the private rented sector? There were a series of recommendations in the report, upon which we have acted. It is the case that we will bring forward changes to ensure that the student market, which operates differently from other aspects of the private rented sector, is regulated in a different way; it is the case that we will bring forward details of a decent homes standard in the private rented sector, as requested by the Select Committee; and it is the case that we will ensure that the justice system, which is controlled by the Ministry of Justice and His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service, is fit for purpose before we move ahead with some of the reforms in the Bill.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con)**: May I add my thanks to my right hon. Friend for finally publishing a response to the Select Committee? He will recall that, as Chair of the Liaison Committee, I wrote to him last week—he responded very promptly, for which I am grateful. However, the Government's response was published only on Friday, more than six months after the Committee published its original report, yet it is de rigueur in the civil service code that responses should be published within two months. Will he explain to the House why it took so long, can he give an assurance that it will not happen again, and will he say what measures are being taken to ensure that such delays will not recur?

**Michael Gove**: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which gives me an opportunity to apologise to the House, on behalf of the Government, my Department and in particular myself, for the delay in responding to a number of Select Committee reports that have been put forward. The Chairman of the Select Committee knows that I hold him and his Committee in the highest regard. I deeply regret the delays in responding to the many excellent reports that the Select Committee has put forward. The reasons for that relate to policy discussions within Government. We wanted to make sure that we had a clear and settled position in response, but that does not excuse us of the need to do better. I have discussed with Ministers and others in the Department the vital importance of responding quickly and showing respect for this House, so may I again apologise to my hon. Friend and to the Chairman of the Select Committee?

**Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD)**: The delay has cost hundreds of families in my constituency their homes. Section 21 evictions have been carried out on so many families, as the sector has moved into the Airbnb short-term let market. Will the Secretary of State apologise to those families? Will he also very quickly bring in the change of use designations that I know he is considering, to ensure that short-term lets and also second homes are separate categories of planning use, so that we can protect our lakes and dales communities and ensure that they can survive?

**Michael Gove**: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I have an enormous amount of respect for the work that he does in this area. I would draw a distinction between the response to the Select Committee's report and the bringing forward of legislation, but he is absolutely right to draw attention to the fact that we need to consider—and we are—our responses to the consultations on registration and on changes to planning use requirements in the short-term let market. We hope to come forward shortly with our response to those consultations. I should also say that I had the opportunity last week to talk to the founder of Airbnb, and I outlined concerns very similar to those that the hon. Gentleman has outlined.

**Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green)**: *rose—*

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP)**: *rose—*

**Michael Gove**: I will not give way at this stage; I will make a wee bit of progress, then I hope to give way shortly.

I want to emphasise that a healthy private rented sector is in all our interests. Making sure that both landlords and tenants have a new deal and a fair deal is critical.

**Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab)**: Will the Secretary of State give way?

**Michael Gove**: Not for the moment.

The private rented sector has doubled in size since 2004, to the point where it now constitutes between 19% and 20% of the total housing stock in our country. Given the number of people in the private rented sector, it is absolutely vital that we ensure that tenants have the rights that they deserve, while also recognising the importance of the private rental sector to our economy and the fact that the overwhelming number of private landlords provide an excellent service. It is also important that we provide them with the rights to redress required when dealing with antisocial tenants, tenants in arrears or other factors that may mean that they need to have recourse to securing vacant possession of a property.

The private rental sector is vital for reasons of labour mobility and personal convenience and, overall, because of the different ways that we respond to the labour market and other pressures at different points in all our lives. We need a healthy private rented sector. I would like to place on the record my thanks to Ben Beadle and the National Residential Landlords Association for the work they have consistently done to ensure that the voice of landlords is heard and to ensure, as Ben Beadle has made clear, that landlords, the overwhelming majority of whom provide a good service, can be certain—because of our property portal, the ombudsman and the other changes in the Bill—that the small minority of poor landlords who victimise tenants can be driven out of the system and the good name of those in the private rented sector upheld.

**Several hon. Members rose—**:

**Michael Gove**: I am very happy to give way to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), then to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), then to the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) and then to the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark).

**Caroline Lucas**: There is plenty to welcome in this Bill, but it should have been an opportunity to increase minimum energy efficiency standards. When the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero last week tried to defend the scrapping of energy efficiency standards for the PRS, she essentially said, on the Floor of the House, that it was because they could cost property owners up to £15,000. The right hon. Gentleman will know that the regulations include a £10,000 cap, so the cost cannot possibly be £15,000; indeed, according to the Government's own assessment, the average cost of upgrading homes to an energy performance certificate rating of C would be less than £5,000. Will he please correct the record, apologise on behalf of his colleague, who has misled the House, and put it on the record that it could not possibly cost £15,000? His own assessment suggests that it costs less than £5,000.

**Michael Gove**: I am grateful to the hon. Lady; no one could doubt her sincerity or her commitment to making sure that we improve the condition of homes and that we deal with energy efficiency. The first thing to say is that the cost will be determined in the market. The amount that an individual might have to pay can be capped by legislation, but the cost is a function of the market. The second thing that it is important to stress is that the decent homes standard, and indeed the work we are doing on retrofitting overall, will improve, and has improved, energy efficiency, but we need to balance the improvement of energy efficiency against the costs that individual landlords and tenants face in a cost-of-living time that is challenging.

**Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind)**: *rose—*

**Jim Shannon**: *rose—*

**Michael Gove**: I am happy to give way to the hon. Member for Strangford.

**Jim Shannon**: The Minister is right to say that the encouragement of private landlords is important to ensure that rental properties are available, but it is also incredibly important that unscrupulous landlords are not facilitated in avoiding their obligations. In relation to the obligations, Citizens Advice has recently announced some figures, which show that 48% of evicted tenants have been told that their landlord wanted to sell. This is a common reason for ending a tenancy. With respect, nothing in this legislation suggests that landlords must give evidence that they have followed through on their intention to sell. Will the Minister rectify that?

**Michael Gove**: Of course, landlords and any property owner must have the right to sell their home if they need or wish to do so; nothing should interfere with that. None the less, it is the case that there may be circumstances in which there will be some landlords who use an attempt to sell, or a claim to sell, as a feint in order to evict a tenant. In Committee, we will explain how we will ensure that, in those circumstances, the situation is effectively dealt with.

**Mr Perkins**: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. This weekend I was out meeting flood victims in Chesterfield. The flood damage of one of them was up to 3 feet high in their front room. They were told by the landlord, who was busy as I arrived, hoovering the carpet, which had sewage and river effluent all over it, that they must accept that the landlord would attempt to clean the carpet rather than a renter expecting a new one and that if they would not tolerate that, she would end their tenancy and throw them out. Does that not demonstrate how the balance of power between landlords and renters is totally skewed? Is there not all the more need for the strongest possible legislation to ensure that we do take action against those rogue landlords?

**Michael Gove**: I agree with the hon. Gentleman up to a point, but I would not characterise it in quite that way. On the basis of everything that he has said, that was completely the wrong response from the landlord concerned, but I would stress that there is only a minority of bad landlords and also that the law clearly delineates, and has done so for some time, the responsibilities for repair between the tenant and the landlord. It is important that we always strike a balance between the need of landlords to ensure that their business is effective and the protection that tenants enjoy. If the hon. Gentleman writes to me about that specific case, I will see what I can do to help.

**Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab)**: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. My constituents, Esther and Fred, lost their son two weeks ago in the most horrific of circumstances. The very week that they lost their son they were served a section 21 notice, despite the landlord knowing their circumstances. What message does it send to renters like Esther and Fred that the Government are yet again delaying the abolition of section 21 evictions?

**Michael Gove**: I am deeply sorry to hear about the personal tragedy that the hon. Lady's constituents have suffered—please do pass on my sympathy and condolences. I would say, though, that this Bill leads to the abolition of section 21, and it does so in a way that I believe is right and proportionate. I will explain why I think it is necessary, but before doing so I must give way to the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn).

**Jeremy Corbyn**: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. I noted he said that, nationally, around 20% of the population live in the private rented sector. In constituencies such as mine, the figure is 30% to 35%, and many people feel very insecure in their lives. For those on universal credit and housing benefit, the problem is that the local housing allowance does not meet their rent needs. Therefore, they are actually subsidising landlords through their benefits and living in desperate poverty as a result of it. In turn, this forces people in mainly ex-council properties to leave the borough, so we end up with a sort of social cleansing of our inner cities all over the country. Does the Secretary of State understand that we need rent control, so that those people who cannot afford to remain in their own home get some comfort and are allowed to continue being a valuable part of our local communities?

**Michael Gove**: Although the right hon. Gentleman and I have had many disagreements, there is no one who doubts that he is a very assiduous constituency Member, and he is right that the pressures faced by a number of people in the private rented sector are significant. The principal reason for those rental pressures is inflation. We can debate the causes of inflation, but this Government are determined to do everything possible to halve it. and I believe the steps that we are taking have shown progress so far.

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD)**: *rose—*

**Michael Gove**: Please forgive me; I am just responding to the right hon. Gentleman. It is the case that our effective system of tribunals ensures that excessive rents that are way out of kilter with the market can be dealt with. However, one of the challenges of rent controls of the kind that I believe he is advocating, and that have been advocated by others on the Labour Front Bench, is that they are proven to reduce supply overall, and a reduction of supply on the scale that an intervention of the kind that he puts forward would only increase rents and reduce the capacity of people to be able to live in the private rented sector.

**Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con)**: Does my right hon. Friend not agree that the Bill would do exactly what he has just been saying is the problem with rent control, which is to drive private landlords out of the market? Is that not entirely contrary to the Government's main aim right now, which is to bring down inflation? Private rents are the key cause of core inflation, and this is a disastrous Bill for every renter in the country who wants to see a well-supplied housing market.

**Michael Gove**: I am very fond of my hon. Friend, but that is just not true. We have seen an increase in the number of homes in the private rented sector recently, not a reduction. *[Interruption.]*As we say in Scotland,

“facts are chiels that winna ding.”

There is no evidence at all that the abolition of section 21, and at the same time the enhancement of section 8, will lead to any reduction in the number of homes in the private rented sector. However, let me say to him, and to the whole House, that what we need is not so much an arbitrage between the private rented sector and the number of homes available for private ownership, or indeed the social rented sector, but more homes overall. It is that which is at the root of our challenge, and we will solve it with our long-term plan for housing, which was outlined in July of this year.

**Several hon. Members rose—**:

**Michael Gove**: No, I have been generous so far. Every intervention only takes time from those who wish to contribute to the debate. Let me develop my argument and then I will give way to some other colleagues—but perhaps not all.

I just wish to stress what the abolition of section 21 involves. Getting rid of section 21 means that a weapon used by unscrupulous landlords can no longer be in their hands. Essentially, section 21 no-fault eviction is used by that small minority of bad landlords to intimidate tenants. It is the case that a significant number of tenants have concerns about the quality of their home, or indeed about excessive rent rises, but section 21 has been used to silence those who have complained about the quality of their property, to intimidate them into accepting excessive rent rises, and in certain circumstances it has been prosecuted anyway, leading to a significant number of people—20,000 in the past year—finding themselves rendered homeless, and therefore the taxpayer and local authorities having to pay for their accommodation.

It is in nobody's interests to allow unscrupulous landlords to continue to behave in this way, to allow vulnerable people to be rendered voiceless in this way, and to force the taxpayer to pick up the bill. The idea that abolishing section 21 is somehow un-Conservative is to me absolutely nonsensical. Conservatives exist to protect the vulnerable in society, to make sure that markets work and to save the taxpayer money. I have to say to any hon. Member who thinks that such a policy is un-Conservative that they should consider the Conservative record. The artisans' dwellings Act 1875, the Law of Property Act 1925, the Leasehold Property (Repairs) Act 1938, the Landlord and Tenant Act 1954, the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985—when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister—the Housing and Planning Act 2016 and the Tenant Fees Act 2019 were all Conservative measures introduced by Conservative Prime Ministers in order to ensure that the private rented sector could work better and, critically, they all make provision for the rights of tenants.

**Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD)**: *rose—*

**Michael Gove**: I am more than happy to give way—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale)**: Order. I think that I am right in saying that the hon. Lady has only just entered the Chamber. She should wait for a wee while before she rises to intervene.

**Several hon. Members rose—**:

**Michael Gove**: I will give way to colleagues in a moment. The key thing to consider when thinking about how those in the private rented sector live is that the overwhelming majority of landlords do a great job, but we know that, because of section 21, 23% of tenants in that sector who wished to complain about conditions chose not to do so, and 31% of those who did were subsequently evicted under section 21. As I mentioned, 20,000 people were assessed as homeless as a direct result.

I am absolutely committed—as was the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) when she was Prime Minister, as was the former Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip when he was Prime Minister, and as all Conservative Members were when we put it in our 2019 manifesto—to getting rid of section 21, but it is important to recognise that in so doing we need to strengthen the provisions that landlords have in order to deal with those tenants who, for whatever reason, need to be evicted from their property.

We are outlining an extensive range of provisions under section 8. We are moving to ensure that antisocial behaviour is dealt with more effectively by making it mandatory grounds for removing a tenant. We are lowering the threshold so that it is easier to establish antisocial behaviour. We are dealing more effectively with rent arrears, and the way in which some unscrupulous tenants have hitherto manipulated the system on rent arrears. We are making it clear that anyone who wishes to occupy their property because they need to sell it, repair it, or have family member within it, or for any other reason, can do so. It is about strengthening both protections for tenants and powers for landlords in the cases where they need it.

**Several hon. Members rose—**:

**Michael Gove**: I am now more than happy to give way to a range of colleagues.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale)**: Order. I will allow the right hon. Gentleman to do that in just a moment, but first let me set the record straight. The Clerks have informed me that the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) was in the Chamber from the start. I apologise. I would not wish that to influence the decision of the Secretary of State on who he gives way to.

**Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con)**: I accept entirely the force of what the Secretary of State has said, but clearly under section 8 many landlords will, for perfectly legitimate reasons—to get rid of a tenant for antisocial behaviour or whatever—have recourse to section 21 simply because of the convenience and ease, particularly in the face of tenants who make particular difficulties. That is why the provisions that he is making in respect of the courts being able to deal with such things effectively and efficiently are vital as part of the reform that he is bringing forward.

**Michael Gove**: Actually, I agree with my right hon. Friend. It is vital that we ensure that the courts system is reformed and that we have end-to-end digitisation. We have seen section 21 abused, but if a determined tenant wishes, for whatever reason, to ignore section 21, that ends up in the courts anyway.

**Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con)**: My constituent Jan Childs rented a property in Much Wenlock to an individual she got into a dispute with. He has now scarpered, owing my constituent £10,000, and nobody seems to be interested in helping her to retrieve the money—neither the police nor the local authorities. How will this Bill help my constituent Jan Childs to retrieve her £10,000?

**Michael Gove**: It is not so much this Bill; it is more the steps that we are taking in order to improve the justice system that will help, but I would be grateful if my hon. Friend would write to me about that particular situation. It is always the case, no matter how well framed any piece of legislation might be, that if we are dealing with unscrupulous characters who seek to evade justice, we have to rely on the agencies of the criminal justice system to pursue them.

**Sir Desmond Swayne**: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise; I should have referred to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests when I intervened.

**Michael Gove**: My right hon. Friend is nearly always right and always honourable.

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD)**: I, too, put on the record my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Some months ago, I raised with the hon. Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan), who is present, my concerns about the illegal eviction laws, which are over 40 years old, complex and difficult to understand. Unless we reform illegal eviction law alongside section 21, I worry that bad landlords will take matters into their own hands. Has the Department taken into account the concerns that I raised with Government officials about reforming illegal eviction law at the same time?

**Michael Gove**: I know that my colleague the Housing and Planning Minister has met the hon. Lady, and we will respond in further detail about the steps that we propose to take.

**Munira Wilson**: Given that the Secretary of State is getting quite a few pot shots from behind him, let me help him out by saying that I welcome the ban on section 21 no-fault evictions. It is sadly very overdue, and I hope that he will not delay in implementing it, because as a London MP I have had countless people in my surgeries and contacting me via email who have been evicted under section 21. A most egregious case involved a father of two young children, both of whom were gravely ill. He had to tackle the mould in his home himself because the landlord was not dealing with it. Then the landlord evicted him for making the repairs. Will the Secretary of State commit to implementing the reform without delay?

**Michael Gove**: Absolutely. The sooner the Bill is on the statute book, the sooner we can proceed. Alongside that, we of course need to ensure that the justice system, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) made clear, is in a position to implement it effectively. That is why the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), is present. He and I, and the Minister for Housing and Planning, are working to do just that.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op)**: On the enhanced grounds for antisocial behaviour, I have one constituent who has been evicted because their baby was crying too much, and another who has been evicted because her husband was beating her too loudly. Does the Secretary of State not recognise that the grounds need to be discretionary ones on which the courts can deliberate, not mandatory ones? Otherwise, it will be a handle for abusers to use.

**Michael Gove**: I very much take the hon. Gentleman's point. I do not believe that either of those two cases would count as antisocial behaviour under our proposals, but we need to ensure that we are clear about what constitutes antisocial behaviour liable to lead to eviction and what is, as in those cases, either a preposterous claim or an example of domestic abuse that the police should be investigating.

**Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab)**: I, too, welcome the intention to scrap no-fault evictions. A year ago I asked about the matter at Prime Minister's questions, saying, “It's going to be winter. It's cold.” As 2019 was a long time ago, I welcome the proposals, although some detail is needed on the burden of proof.

Under Thatcher, from my recollection, the Conservatives were the party of the family, so why has the blanket ban on unscrupulous landlords saying, “No children,” vanished, as has the no-people-on-benefits stipulation? A I know from my weekly surgery, landlords who say, “No DSS” are the big barrier to unlocking this part of the market, because pensioners and others are excluded. Have the Conservatives done away with Thatcher, or is their tail being wagged by all the people—apparently one in five Tory MPs is a landlord—making declarations of interests?

**Michael Gove**: First, we will be clear that landlords cannot have blanket bans of the kind that the hon. Lady rightly draws to the House's attention. Secondly, colleagues will declare interests, but landlords are good things. We need landlords to provide homes. It is nothing to be ashamed of to be in the business of providing a safe, warm and decent home for someone, and there is nothing wrong with people who have saved and work hard investing in property. You do not need to be Margaret Thatcher to believe that that is right.

**Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab)**: The Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee raised the need for an effective and efficient court system to deal with such matters. Evictions will now have to go to court because they will not be automatic under section 21. Also, many more tenants may go to court over landlords refusing to do repairs, because they will no longer fear retaliatory evictions.

Officials in the Department have suggested that the delays in implementing the Bill came about because of the need to reform the courts, and that that is down to the Select Committee. As I am sure the Secretary of State is aware, the Select Committee actually recommended a specialist housing court—we did that several years ago. If the Secretary of State had agreed to that at the time, there would no longer be any need for delay. The court would be up and running, and be effective and efficient in dealing with cases in the future.

**Michael Gove**: I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee, but the view of the Ministry of Justice, His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service and others involved in the court system is that the creation of a specialist housing court would divert resources from the effort to make the existing system work better. But good people can disagree on that point.

**Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con)**: I rise as what is known as an “accidental landlord”, who conveniently owns and rents out a property in Tamworth. Speaking as a landlord, I welcome the Bill—particularly the property portal, which will allow councils to focus their resource better on landlords who provide poor-quality accommodation and give councils the opportunity to drive them out of business.

**Michael Gove**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Two of the less conspicuous but important parts of the Bill are the creation of the property portal and the role of the private rented sector ombudsman. If they work effectively, both should obviate the need for the court processes that the Chair of the Select Committee and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) have mentioned. The property portal should ensure that we can identify properties in the private rented sector whose landlords have not registered, and we can focus our enforcement action on them.

**Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con)**: I welcome better protections for renters; in my constituency, swathes of constituents have been evicted so that landlords can flip their properties to become short-term holiday lets. Nationally, there may have been a growth in landlord numbers, but the Country Land and Business Association and the English housing survey both report that rural seats have seen a demise in landlord numbers of about 24%. In my constituency, we have lost 67% of our long-term landlords since the end of the pandemic. What steps will be taken to reverse the trend, so that long-term landlords come back into constituencies such as mine?

**Michael Gove**: What I would like to see in my hon. Friend's constituency and so many others is an increase in housing overall—houses for social rent, for private rent and, above all, for people to own. As the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) pointed out, there is a particular challenge in the very attractive parts of the country, such as those my hon. Friend represents, that attract tourism.

There has been a phenomenon whereby houses that would have been available for rent to the local community have been Airbnb-ised, although not just through that company. They have been turned into short-term lets and effectively been operating as shadow B&Bs or shadow hotels. There is nothing wrong—there is everything right—with making sure that we utilise property as efficiently as possible, but that has created percussive and deleterious consequences in some areas. That is why we are consulting on both using the planning system and also, with our colleagues in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, a form of registration to ensure that the situation works. Ultimately, however, the challenge is increasing supply overall.

**Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab)**: The Secretary of State has just mentioned the private rental ombudsman, a post that I welcome. Is he considering the case for giving that job to the existing housing ombudsman, who supports the social housing sector at the moment?

**Michael Gove**: Yes, we are. There is a case for both a separate organisation and for having the issue fall to the existing ombudsman—who, I have to say, has been doing a very effective job.

I must draw my remarks to a close shortly so that all colleagues who wish to contribute can, but the right hon. Gentleman's intervention provides me an opportunity to suggest that the condition of housing in this country—particularly housing built in the '50s, '60s and '70s—is a profound cause for concern. Many of those homes are reaching the end of their natural lives. As a result of how they were built, we are seeing not just building safety issues but children in particular living in homes that are not decent.

The tragedy of Awaab Ishak's death reminded us that damp, mould and other poor housing conditions can have a deleterious effect not just on life chances but on lives themselves. That is why the Social Housing (Regulation) Act, the actions of the housing ombudsman and the actions that my Department has taken have been focused on ensuring that registered providers and social landlords live up to their responsibilities.

What we seek to do in the Bill is ensure that the small minority of private sector landlords who also need to up their game do so. We are not targeting any one sector. We are not targeting registered providers of social housing while leaving the private rented sector off the hook; nor are we directing particular attention to the private rented sector and letting registered social landlords off the hook. What we are doing is ensuring that citizens, who deserve a warm, decent, safe home, get one. That is what the establishment of the decent homes standard through this legislation will do.

**Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab)**: The Bill would have been a good opportunity to bring forward provisions ensuring that homes are kept at a decent standard. Will the Secretary of State assure the House that he will bring forward measures before the next election that will address decent home standards for the private rented sector?

**Michael Gove**: At the very beginning of my introduction to the Bill, I stressed my gratitude to all those who had worked to shape the measure and make recommendations on how we could improve it. I am sure that in Committee we will hear representations from different Members and different organisations about how we can improve the Bill further. I am open-minded about that: my aim is to ensure that we get a new deal and a fair deal for both landlords and tenants.

I have listened to representations from the National Residential Landlords Association and others about making sure that the overwhelming majority of landlords, who do a great job, are able to deal with a small minority of tenants who behave badly. I have also listened to representations from individual tenants and those campaigning for them, who want us to move ahead with the abolition of section 21 and the establishment of the portal. The establishment of the portal and the existence of the ombudsman will, I believe, ensure that landlords are on firmer ground and no longer undercut by rogues, and that tenants get a better deal. It is because the Bill provides both landlords and tenants with stronger protections for the future that I commend it to the House.

**Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab)**: It is a pleasure to open this debate on behalf of the Opposition. I start by saying that we on these Benches will not oppose the Bill today—that may be more than can be said for some on the Benches behind the Secretary of State. After nearly five years of foot dragging, it appears that they need to be appeased with yet more delays. We disagree. Renters are at the sharp edge of the current housing crisis and urgently need the protections and support in the Bill—protections that, unfortunately, are just too late for many renters struggling right now in this cost of living crisis. But as they say, better late than never.

I welcome the Bill. In fact, I welcome much of what the Secretary of State said in his opening remarks. We have been calling for such measures for some years. We will be pleased to finally see the abolition of section 21, whenever that actually comes. Labour also welcome the simplification of tenancies, which will give renters more flexibility and rights. It is right that periodic tenancies should become the norm, meaning that renters can give two months' notice and get out of a tenancy at any point.

We further welcome the creation of a new ombudsman; that has the potential to be an essential part of the redress system. For too long, renters have lacked basic power and control over one of the fundamentals of life: their home. Tenants have struggled to challenge unfair treatment without undergoing lengthy and expensive court proceedings. If this ombudsman is given the proper teeth and resources, they will have an important role to play in levelling the playing field. I think the Secretary of State agrees.

We are pleased that the Tory rebrand of Labour's proposed landlords register has made it into the Bill, too. The register is good for landlords and tenants. Finally, it is good to see the Government build in provisions to make it easier for renters to have pets. As I am sure the Prime Minister agrees, pets are an important part of the family, just as long as we remember not to let them off the lead illegally.

After four and a half years of foot-dragging, there can be no more dither and delay in ending no-fault evictions. The Secretary of State made strong points in his opening remarks, but I am afraid that he did not see the faces behind him—I can see why he has spent years arguing with the landlords on his Back Benches. Tenants across the country have been wrongfully evicted, kicked out of their homes and made homeless. In fact, since his Government first announced the end of no-fault evictions back in April 2019, a total of 71,310 households have been kicked out on to the street. That is more than 70,000 families put at risk of homelessness since this Government first proposed to protect them. Every single day another person suffers the same fate. According to Shelter, private renters over the age of 55 are served a section 21 eviction notice every 16 minutes. It has taken the Government four and a half years to reach the Second Reading of the Bill.

**Mr Perkins**: The Secretary of State was at pains to stress that the majority of landlords are good ones. It is almost like saying that there has been a delay to murder legislation because most people do not kill people. The reality is that we need legislation because there are some bad landlords, and the imbalance between renters and landlords is huge. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, although it is welcome that we have finally got to Second Reading, many people have been let down by how long it has taken? It is now the responsibility of us all to get the legislation moving as quickly as we can.

**Angela Rayner**: I agree. I hope I can bring the House together when I say that it is right that we get moving on this issue. The Secretary of State has made it clear that the Government will move on it, but I am concerned about potential delays. I will come to those points in more detail.

**Jim Shannon**: There may well be consensus in the House—I hope there is; we will see how it goes later on. A major issue that comes to my attention and that of many others is mould, condensation and damp in houses, about which tenants tell me regularly. Does the right hon. Lady feel that the Bill can satisfactorily address that to ensure the health and safety of tenants and their families?

**Angela Rayner**: We need legislation for decent homes alongside these provisions. I hope that we can get into that, and how we can protect people, in Committee. As the Secretary of State acknowledged, at the moment many families face a situation of inadequate housing, which goes beyond the scope of the Bill. I think we all agree that that needs to be addressed as soon as possible.

**Caroline Lucas**: On decent home standards, would the right hon. Lady support the integration of Awaab's law into the Bill? We are talking about delays, but my concern is that if those provisions do not make it into the Bill right now, our constituents, including some of mine in Brighton, will still be living in absolutely atrocious accommodation, with water streaming down their walls, mould and kids getting ill.

**Angela Rayner**: If we can address that in the Bill, we should push for it, but we should also push to ensure that, whether in social housing or private rentals, people should have confidence that their homes are safe. Homes should be a safe place, but at the moment, that is not the case for too many.

Huge swathes of renters have been left paying a heavy price for the Government's inaction on section 21. This is real for people such as the Brady family, who live in Wiltshire and have experienced two no-fault evictions in the past two years. Mr Brady is a gardener and Mrs Brady works full time. After being forced out of their home, where they had lived for 15 years, they have resorted to living in their van. The family are able to bid on council houses when they become available, but so far, everything has been at least an hour away from where they live. Mr Brady said:

“There is a housing crisis and there are reasons behind it—you can use whatever excuses you want but it is a political decision. It was a political decision not to build enough houses, it was a political decision to sell off the social housing stock.”

Those are not my words but the words of a man who would still have a roof over his head if the Government had not dragged their feet.

I feel that more delay is inevitable. Conservative Members threatened in the newspapers this weekend to choose their self-interest over the national interest by opposing or delaying the Bill. They do not want to see these changes enacted. Then, on Friday evening, the Department snuck out the suggestion that section 21 changes are dependent on court improvements, which could take years to complete. Today we discovered—not from an announcement to the press, to Parliament or to the public, but from a leak—that that is indeed the core part of a grubby private deal that the Secretary of State has struck behind closed doors with his own Back Benchers. So the Government who broke our justice system are now using their own failure as an excuse to break their own promises.

Just how long will it take? Can the Secretary of State promise that the Government will meet the pledge they made at the last general election, which he mentioned, before the next general election? Renters simply cannot afford any more excuses or delays; he must provide clarity on that. *[Interruption.]* I know that he is a confident Secretary of State—he says so from a sedentary position—and I have confidence in his abilities, but people who are facing section 21 notices cannot afford any more dither and delay. He will get support from those on the Labour Benches in enacting this legislation to protect families who need protection.

We think that the Bill is a good starting point. We fear that a number of loopholes have been left in it, however. One such loophole is the commencement clause, which leaves Ministers the power to decide when—or, perhaps, whether—to actually bring an end to section 21. But that is not the only loophole. I hope that the Minister will engage with us constructively in Committee to close all those loopholes and strengthen the Bill in a range of areas.

For example, the new grounds for and protections from evictions are a welcome step, but the details on those grounds remain vague. On evictions, there remains a loophole by which renters are protected only for the first six months of their tenancy if their landlord decides to sell the property or move back in. That time limit needs to be increased as part of the Bill to give renters proper protection.

On section 21, it is not just a question of when the law is implemented but of how. Every household threatened with homelessness by a section 21 notice has the right to assistance from their local council to prevent them from becoming homeless, but the Bill removes that right to immediate help. That loophole could lead to a huge spike in homelessness and must be closed.

**Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab)**: My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I am grateful to her for highlighting that point; I have come across such cases, and it is an absolutely appalling situation. Often young families are thrust out of their homes with very little notice, and local authorities struggle to cope. At the moment, many such cases that I have come across involve people being moved to B&Bs out of the area.

**Angela Rayner**: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting that concern. To be fair to the Secretary of State, he acknowledged the challenges in his remarks—not just the housing challenges but all the challenges faced by families. People are scared and live insecure lives because of the devastation and ripple effect of the challenges they face.

**Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab)**: My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the human cost of those evictions, but there is also a financial cost to councils. Bristol City Council pays exorbitant amounts to put people into emergency and temporary accommodation, which it should not have to do, so does she agree that, on top of helping people by ensuring that they do not have to go through the pain of eviction, the Government have a financial interest in resolving the issue?

**Angela Rayner**: I absolutely agree. I also think that, as the Secretary of State mentioned, most private landlords want to do the right thing and are a good part of our housing mix. They should therefore welcome the fact that we are doing our best to ensure that their good name is upheld and that they are not stained by the tiny minority who do not do the right thing, who are the reason why these protections are so overdue.

We are also concerned that the changes to antisocial behaviour grounds are, as they stand, ambiguous and open to abuse. Mental health needs and domestic abuse are sometimes reported as antisocial behaviour, so that definition must be made more pragmatic and focused on genuine antisocial behaviour. The Secretary of State made reference to this issue, and I heard what he said; I look forward to working with him in Committee to address it, because it is important.

The Bill is also silent on the issue of economic evictions. While it strengthens the law to ensure landlords can only increase rents once a year, which is welcome, the mechanism for tenants to contest excessive rent hikes is not strong enough, giving people little real protection against so-called economic evictions.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle**: Is there not a particular problem with the evidence that the rent tribunals will look at? The proposal is that they will look at the average market rents, but the local housing allowance is set at only 30% of the local average, meaning that rents could increase above the LHA and no one would be able to complain about it.

**Angela Rayner**: It is absolutely right that we get into these challenges, because I do not think people feel that the current situation provides redress for the challenges they face. I hope that in Committee, the Secretary of State will listen to points made by Members across the House to ensure that people get the redress and support that they need, and that we strengthen tenants' rights in this area.

**Mr Betts**: The Bill does not really deal with the issue of affordability at all. One of the big issues is the freezing of the local housing allowance: some 90% of properties in the private rented sector are not affordable with the amount of LHA that is payable. The Select Committee recommended that we go back to the 30% figure, as was previously the case, so could we push for that to happen? Currently, many people simply cannot afford anything at all in the private rented sector.

**Angela Rayner**: We have to get into that issue, but we also have to deal with the root cause, which is that we do not have enough adequate social housing in this country. We do not have enough housing, and that is because of 13 years of the Tories' failure to build the housing that we need and to challenge Members on their Back Benches. The Prime Minister has failed to challenge those on his Back Benches who have delayed house building in this country when we need it so desperately.

The Secretary of State mentioned the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) and the White Paper, but I am disappointed that many of the proposals in the Government's White Paper have since been dropped. The Secretary of State said that he is open-minded, and I am glad about that, because the Bill is silent on proposals to make blanket bans on renting to families with children or those in receipt of benefits illegal. That sort of unacceptable practice must be stamped out, and I hope he will work with us to make sure the Bill does so. In the White Paper, the Government also promised to introduce the decent homes standard to give renters safer, better-value homes and remove the blight of poor-quality homes in local communities. That standard is missing from the Bill, but I did hear what the Secretary of State said in his opening remarks. I gently say to him that we cannot miss an opportunity to give private renters the protection—the long-term security and better rights and conditions—that they deserve.

**Wera Hobhouse**: To ensure that tenants have that safety, does the right hon. Lady agree that we need a new regulator for all private rentals with the power to subject landlords to regular inspections?

**Angela Rayner**: The Bill talks about the ombudsman. We need to make sure that landlords understand their obligations, and where they do not, we need to ensure that there is redress. As I mentioned earlier, that ombudsman must have real teeth, and I hope the Secretary of State understands that. While I respect the landlords who are in the Chamber and those who are listening to this debate—I know many of them do a good job and are trying their best—we have to have a minimum standard. We cannot have circumstances, as we have seen in Greater Manchester, where children are living in very poor conditions. It is really important that we have regulation and, where people are in accommodation that falls below those standards, we have redress.

After four years, the clock is ticking. There can be no more delay, but the Government's track record does not instil much confidence. On the Tories' watch, mortgage bills and rents are soaring, fewer people are able to buy their own home, and over 1 million people are stuck on social housing waiting lists. Those problems are only going to get worse because the Prime Minister could not stand up to his Back Benchers on house building targets. Now it appears that once again, he is caving in to them, rather than keeping his promises to the British people.

This Bill is an important step forward, supporting renters at the sharp edge of the cost of living crisis, so Labour will work constructively throughout its passage. We will not be the cause of delay—I hope the Secretary of State can say the same about his Back Benchers. If they cannot act in the national interest and support a renters' reform Bill worthy of its name, let me make clear that our offer is to do so instead, because over the course of our proceedings today, 33 renters will have been put at risk of homelessness because they were issued with a section 21 notice and 11 will have got a visit from the bailiffs evicting them. Every single one of those people will be faced with anxiety about the future—anxiety about having to pay eye-watering moving costs and about whether they will be made completely homeless. They cannot afford to wait for the Prime Minister to find a backbone and stand up to his party. They cannot afford to wait for the Secretary of State to buy off his Back Benchers, and they cannot afford to wait yet more years for this Government to keep the promises they made to them.

We stand ready to work in the national interest, and will do so with anyone else who is prepared to join us. I urge the House not to waste this chance.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)**: It will be obvious to the House that a great many people want to catch my eye. We have a long time—we have three hours ahead—but I want to be fair in the way that that is divided up, so we will begin with a time limit of seven minutes.

**Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con)**: In 2014, fellow housing expert Calum Mercer and I published a then-seminal paper called “Nation Rent”. That paper challenged what was then the status quo, which was that generation rent affected only younger people and would be a passing phase. “Nation Rent” set out that it was a changing structural environment in the housing and financial markets that had occurred since 2003, which saw a rapid acceleration of the private rented sector—overtaking social rent—together with a fall in home ownership. That structural change started long before the credit crunch and financial crash, but accelerated after them.

A decade on, little has changed in structural terms, and it should concern Members of all parties that generation rent has now become nation rent. The percentage of people aged between 35 and 44 and between 45 and 54 who are renting privately has tripled over the past two decades, and has more than doubled for those aged between 55 and 64. Nation rent is now embedded, not just in the younger generation but through the generations. As I set out in my 2018 paper with the Housing and Finance Institute, “A Time for Good Homes”, that structural change towards private renting affected around 2.4 million homes, or around 6 million people.

The need for legislation reflects that long-term structural shift. The private rented sector is no longer a flex or transitory tenure: it is the main tenure for millions of people for much, if not all, of their lives. The current legislative framework—a short-term tenure for long-term living, one person's pension pot but another person's only home—is not fit for that purpose. That is why there is tension and strain, which is reflected in the design of the Bill and the comments that have been made about it. There is a need to find a new balance that reflects this new reality for millions of people in our country, acting in a way that is fair and responsible to those who are being housed as well as to those who house them.

It remains my view that although the principle of the Bill and its measures are very welcome, they do not go far enough in dealing with the fundamental challenges of an overweighted private sector. There needs to be a long-term plan for housing that rebalances the housing tenure mix—a plan to boost home ownership and expand affordable rented housing substantially; one that unblocks the financial and regulatory constraints on affordable home ownership and professional renting, and one that builds more homes. I continue to work cross-party and cross-industry, inside and outside of this place on those priorities, as I have done for many years and as is reflected in my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Given my long-term campaigning for housing, I was pleased to stand on a manifesto to build 1 million homes this Parliament, work towards 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020s, and scrap section 21 evictions. We have done well on the first, the second is a work in progress and the third manifesto commitment is why we are here today. I know at first hand the personal commitment that the Secretary of State and the Housing Minister bring to this matter, and how hard their commitment to it is.

This is a vital piece of legislation, because it seeks to provide greater security and stability for renters. This matters—and it should matter to everyone on the Conservative Benches—because housing instability destroys wealth creation, damages life chances, restricts educational prospects and harms health. I see this in my constituency inbox, as I am sure do all Members. In my MP surgery, I had a mother who had spent hundreds of pounds of her own money over many years building a comfortable home for her and her disabled daughter, only for them to be turfed out by their landlord with nowhere to go. Recently, I had to discuss with Ukrainian refugees how someone had complained to their landlord about the heating not working, only for them to find themselves served with a section 21 eviction notice. How do you begin to explain that that is just how things work in our country? They should not work like that; this needs to change.

That is why this reform is so important, but we cannot allow any delay, and that includes the proposed delay because, supposedly, repossession is taking too long. That is nonsense. There is already clear court guidance to deal with repossession claims in a timely manner, as set out in civil procedure rule 55.5, which states that the hearing must take place between four and eight weeks from the claim. Although there have been some spikes in court hearings over the covid pandemic, the timeliness of possession claims has remarkably improved. The latest available figures from the Ministry of Justice show that the average time between claims and orders is now back to under eight weeks. The average time between claims and warrants is the same as it was in December 2019, when the Conservative commitment was made to the nation. The repossession figures have collapsed from the post-covid high of 69 weeks, and are back on track to pre-covid levels. For landlords, every single median metric—be that for orders, warrants or possessions—has dramatically improved on the latest Government data.

Therefore, this landmark section 21 reform should not be delayed on the basis that court improvements are required. That was a concern of our Select Committee, and I think it has now been met in part by the improved data. Any change to the Bill that delays the implementation of these vital reforms cannot be supported. This issue affects millions of people in our country. That is why renters reform—specifically the abolition of section 21—was in the 2019 manifesto, on which all of us on the Conservative Benches stood. It was a manifesto that put the Conservatives on the side of the people, and a manifesto that secured such a huge majority. It would be a grave mistake not to honour that commitment, or to stifle it by delay.

To conclude, the Renters (Reform) Bill will provide security and stability to millions of renters across the country. It should be passed by Parliament without any further delay, but we must also do more to continue to unlock home ownership and other housing to deliver the homes and the housing stability that our nation needs.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)**: I call the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee.

**Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab)**: First, I put on record that I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

Having considered the White Paper and then the Bill, the Select Committee welcomes in principle the proposal from the Government to abolish section 21. We heard evidence in a number of sessions from organisations such as Shelter, looking at the interests of tenants, and from the National Residential Landlords Association, and they all accepted that this was the right way to go and engaged constructively with the Select Committee on that.

People's homes can be taken away from them just like that when they have paid their rent and observed their tenancy conditions, and in principle that simply cannot be right. When a home is taken away, people have to move somewhere else, and their children have to uproot themselves from their school and be taken to another school. Members of the family who work may have to find another job somewhere else, because their home has moved and they can no longer get to their place of employment. That simply is not right in this day and age.

We recognise as a Committee—I made this point in an intervention—that there will be added work for the justice system, because evictions will now require a decision from the courts and more tenants may feel empowered to go to the courts. I am really disappointed that the Secretary of State is not going to indicate when he thinks the reforms to the court system will be in place to allow the legislation to be enacted. I think we need assurances today about when that will be. That cannot be an excuse for delaying something that has already been delayed for far too long.

I want to point out one or two other issues. I welcome the Secretary of State's welcome for the work that the Select Committee has done, even though his response was a little late; I accept his apology for that. We said very clearly in our report that enforcement by local authorities will be absolutely key in making these changes work. There has to be proper funding for local authorities, as the Local Government Association has said today, to enable that work to be carried out properly. We want assurances from the Secretary of State on that as well.

One of the really good ideas is the property portal, so that tenants and all of us know who the landlords are. We have suggested some changes and some improvements, on which I think the Secretary of State will come back to us, to make sure that the property portal is comprehensive. It should cover things such as when the property last had a gas safety certificate and when the electrical systems in the house were properly inspected, and information of that kind, including whether it complies with the decent homes standard. All those things are important, and tenants should be able to access that quickly. The registers should be updated and digitised, which we are encouraging the Secretary of State to do. We hope he will come back positively on that.

The cost for tenants is important. We welcome the Secretary of State's saying that rent increases cannot take place more than once a year, but we have concerns about the overload on the tribunal system and the way that those arguments will be played out, often with the landlords having a great advantage. We are not quite sure why the Secretary of State is saying that a tenancy agreement could not have a yearly update of rents in line with inflation, with no need for argument. That is actually the case in many rent agreements now. While it has been difficult in the last couple of years with hyperinflation, historically—with inflation at about 2%—that has not been an issue and it gives some certainty to tenants. We are not sure, and we have not had an explanation, why the Government have ruled that out completely.

Coming back to the point about tenants on benefits, why can we not have a ban on landlords automatically prohibiting tenants on benefits from renting? Surely the Secretary of State should do that, and should indicate very quickly that he is prepared to accept that as an amendment to the Bill.

**Munira Wilson**: I strongly support the point that the hon. Gentleman has just made about the importance of the Government outlawing these blanket bans on renting in the private sector by those who are in receipt of benefits. I have been seeing a double whammy in that, in a constituency such as mine in Twickenham, rents have gone up by over 12% in the past year and, as he said, local housing allowance has not gone up, so people are evicted and banned from renting if they are in receipt of benefits when they try to find a new place. I pay tribute to the work of Citizens Advice Richmond, which has been running a campaign on that. We need to see the ban on such practice in place soon.

**Mr Betts**: I completely agree with those points, and I hope the Secretary of State responds positively to them. I think the situation is of real concern, and there is no reason why the ban cannot be enacted.

I have already made the point about local housing allowance. It is not part of the Secretary of State's Department, but it is part of Government policy. It is always going to be a challenge for tenants to pay their rent in the private rented sector given the rise in rents recently, but people on the lowest incomes and on benefits are now being excluded from most properties because they simply cannot afford it, because their local housing allowance has been frozen. The LHA needs to be lifted. Even if the Secretary of State cannot say so today, I hope he is encouraging those behind the scenes who can make the changes to make them in a proper and timely way.

I have a couple of other points. Student housing is different. The difference in student housing has been recognised where it is purpose-built student housing in that it will be exempt from the ban on periodic tenancies. That is entirely sensible. Recently, we have seen some real pressures on student accommodation in some university cities. Last year, Manchester students were actually being encouraged to live in Liverpool, because there was not enough housing in Manchester for them. That is just one of a number of examples in relation to protecting the student market, including non-purpose-built accommodation.

**Michael Gove**: Briefly, I wish to declare my interest. As the parent of a daughter who is currently at Manchester University, I know exactly what the hon. Gentleman means. We will be doing everything we can.

**Mr Betts**: I recognise that the Secretary of State has responded to the Committee's report, and while not allowing a complete reversal to periodic tenancies for non-purpose built student accommodation, landlords will have the right to terminate the tenancy in line with the university year—I think that is the basis of the proposal he is suggesting. That might well be a good compromise to take things forward, and I am sure the details of that will be tested further in Committee.

On the proposals for the ombudsman, the suggestion in an intervention from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) about having one housing ombudsman, and incorporating the private sector role into the social housing ombudsman role, is very sensible. Why do we need two separate schemes for letting agents? Why can we not have just one ombudsman covering the whole of that area? At least everyone could understand it, rather than having to think, “Which bit do I go to in order to get this grievance raised?” I hope the Secretary of State will reflect on that point, which was simply made, to ensure that the process of redressing grievances works better.

Members of the Committee welcome the basic principle of the changes proposed by the Secretary of State, and we want them to be implemented as quickly as possible. We hope he will continue to listen to those recommendations that he has not yet indicated a willingness to accept.

**Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con)**: Everybody agrees that people deserve to live in rented homes that are safe, warm, free from damp and mould, and in which they can feel secure. Nobody doubts that intention, or the fact that rogue landlords should be clamped down on and be made responsible. However, rogue landlords are the minority—the Secretary of State has said that on the Floor of the House—yet despite that, the Government seem to be tarring every landlord with the same brush with the Bill. The ironic fact is that there is already a plethora of legislation that allows local authorities to clamp down on every housing issue, including the scourge of the rogue landlord. One issue is that councils themselves are often the rogues, citing resources as an excuse for inaction, and with private landlords they already take action, or at least have the powers to take action if they so wish.

Without wishing to pinch the TV advertising slogan, this Bill does not do what it says on the tin. It should be renamed the “rogue landlord and nightmare tenants Bill”, because all it does is force good landlords to take action that they would not normally take. To highlight what I mean, this is what has happened in the past. The Government forced landlords to put deposits into a Government-approved scheme, which landlords did. Any landlord who has tried to get money back from that scheme when tenants have caused damage will know that it is nigh-on impossible. So instead of putting money into deposit schemes, many landlords now do not take deposits. Instead, they have increased rents in order to cover the cost.

The Government do not treat private landlords as sole traders, but instead treat the whole income from rents as taxable, whether someone has a mortgage on the property or not. The result of that is increased rents. The Government stopped paying landlords directly when tenants on benefits are in arrears, instead saying that the contract is with the tenant and not the Government. As a result, good landlords are now forced to take rent in advance—in the old days they used to take it in arrears as those tenants on benefits were paid by universal credit—and they have increased the rents because of the higher risk. Many, many landlords do not take people on benefits as a result of that. The Government say that they will legislate to make it illegal for landlords to discriminate against those on benefits, but when landlords have between 20 and 50 applicants for each house, all the legislation in the world will not make a ha'porth of difference, because the landlord will always take the most risk-free option.

One key component of the Bill is the removal of section 21 “no fault” evictions—because of the time limit I have had to strip loads out of this speech, Madam Deputy Speaker. Leaders Romans Group is one of the UK's largest property maintenance companies. Indeed, it has a landlord client base of more than 65,000. It took a sample survey from those landlords and found that section 21 of the Housing Act 1988 is rarely used, rarely overused, and even more rarely misused. Of all those who responded to the survey, 80% had never used section 21. Of those who had, a significant majority—over 60%—did so because the tenant was in breach of the lease. The English Housing Survey 2021-22 found that only 6% of tenancies ended at the landlord's volition. Both figures demonstrate the fact that the vast majority of landlords do not evict tenants on a whim. To end no-fault evictions through the abolition of section 21 is extreme, unnecessary and damaging to both landlords and tenants.

Let me give a couple of examples about using section 8 evictions to replace section 21. Ground eight is currently the most heavily relied on ground for landlords trying to gain repossession, and it currently provides a two-week notice period. It applies where the tenant is two months in rent arrears at the date of the section 8 notice and the date of the possession hearing. In the Bill, the notice period has been extended to four weeks. Also, any outstanding universal credit payments that the tenant is due to receive are not to be included when calculating the arrears, if the universal credit payment would reduce arrears below the two-month threshold. The Government cannot say to landlords on one hand that the contract for UC is between the landlord and the tenant, but in the Bill say that the landlord has to take off the pending UC payments for rent. It is a nonsense.

I am short of time, so I will briefly mention expanding the powers for antisocial behaviour under section 8 of the Housing Act 1988. It is unlikely to change the effect of ground 14, which—I think this question was asked earlier—is not mandatory but discretionary. That means that the judge has to consider whether it is reasonable to make a possession order, even if a tenant is guilty of the alleged conduct. It is very unlikely that any court would consider some trivial conduct to justify a possession order.

As has been mentioned several times, the real issue is the inaction in building more houses for people to live in—that is not just this Government but successive Governments. The market will not change until a Government grasp the nettle and literally put spades in the ground, as Macmillan did in the 1950s. There is a reason why we have the Homes for Ukraine scheme: it is because we do not have any houses to put people in. There is a reason why over 100,000 young men are staying in hotels in this country: it is because we have no homes to put them in. The Bill will do absolutely nothing to improve the rental market. It will drive more landlords from the system. The Secretary of State said earlier that the number of landlords in this country has stayed static since 2016, but I would like to know exactly where he gets that information from as it is not the information coming from the market.

**Mr Fysh**: Is my hon. Friend aware that just five days ago Jones Lang LaSalle, one of the biggest property consultants in the world, published a report that analysed Rightmove evidence of rental market availability? It shows that in the south-east and south-west of England, rental availability is down by 32% on 2019. Is that caused by some of the things my hon. Friend has been talking about?

**Craig Whittaker**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is a problem right throughout the country, not just the south-east. It is happening in the north in Calder Valley—wherever people are, there is an absolute shortage of homes, whether socially or privately rented. The Bill will do nothing to improve the rental market. It will drive more landlords from the system, and because of those shortages of homes to rent, where dozens of people apply for any homes that are available, the Bill will also do nothing to curb the rogue landlord element.

**Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab)**: It is genuinely hard to overstate the scale of the housing crisis that we are in, in 2023. Every element of this crisis interacts with every other element, and they all feed off each other, driven—I agree with the right hon. Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) on this one point—by the failure to build enough homes, as well as: the decline in home ownership, particularly among the young; the shrinking of the social rented sector; the growth of the private rented sector, especially, as has been pointed out, given the many different housing markets within the private sector; the growth of the private rented sector for those who are least able to afford that; the growth of homelessness; the pressures of housing costs, driven particularly by the shortfall between the housing element of the social security budget and actual housing costs; the collapse in legal aid and the advice sector; and the pressures on local authorities across the board. That has led to a perfect storm, at the sharp end of which is homelessness.

It is a relief to have this Bill with at least the promise that section 21 will end, because the section 21 powers are used for the most vulnerable and poorest and drive people directly into the homelessness sector. As an MP whose borough has the largest proportion in the private rented sector anywhere in the country, I feel strongly about that. It is profoundly worrying to hear that the Government have backtracked four years after they first promised to abolish section 21. The caveat we now have before us will mean in effect that there will be no progress on protecting tenants over the coming years.

It will be years before those powers are brought into effect, because one of the other elements of this omni-crisis is the shambles that is the courts system. We know that the Ministry of Justice took the single largest proportion of all spending cuts in the post-2010 austerity budget, and it is struggling to cope with the current system. The sector has no plans and no provision to make the changes that the Secretary of State is relying on as a preliminary for abolishing section 21. Every day that goes by means that more people—many highly vulnerable—will face eviction.

On average, 290 London renters a week have faced no-fault evictions since the Government promised to bring an end to them in 2019. Citizens Advice said that it has helped 10,600 households with section 21 cases since this Bill had its First Reading. A six-month delay would mean almost 15,000 more Londoners facing no-fault evictions, and a third of all no-fault evictions in England in recent years have been in the capital. It is London—the most expensive place and the place with the greatest homelessness crisis—that will bear the heaviest burden as a result of further delays by the Secretary of State.

At the heart of all this is the tenants themselves. For many people, insecure tenancies are a nuisance—often an expensive one—that keep them in a state of permanent instability. High levels of population turnover are not good for strong communities. They are linked to low levels of participation at every level of civic society, and they place a particular strain on public services such as GPs and schools. For the most vulnerable, the private sector is a living nightmare, damaging their physical and mental health. All too often, insecurity, unaffordability and poor standards of accommodation come as a single package, placing the greatest strain on those who can cope with it least.

My casework—like that of many other Members, I am sure—is full of examples like these. One constituent wrote to me:

“We have been issued with a section 21 eviction letter by the landlord. I suffer from severe depression and recently had a cornea eye transplant and am still undergoing treatments. My son has autism, asthma, is non-verbal with severe sensory needs and also struggles with change, and we have both suffered serious mental health breakdowns due to our current living conditions.”

These constituents have to wait until the court issues a bailiff warrant for them to be moved into alternative accommodation, but due to the high level of backlog that the courts are experiencing, that will not be any time soon. As she writes:

“This whole process has been severely detrimental to my mental health… My concern is that our current property isn't safe as the kitchen ceiling is about to collapse in on us”.

Another constituent wrote:

“This miscreant of a landlord sent me a section 21 notice for possession of my apartment. I have been a tenant there in good standing for three years. Rent is always paid on the due date. Rent is £850 for a tiny room…with a shared toilet and shower with 17 other tenants. The landlord informs me today that he wants to raise the rent to £1,516…an 80% rent increase out of the clear blue sky!”

A third constituent wrote:

“Today my wife and I were served with a no-fault eviction…principally for refusing to agree to an almost 20% rent increase. This was particularly galling, because in February we had already had an increase of almost 10%. We now have just eight weeks to find a place to live, but as you…know, there is a dearth of properties…not just in this area but other parts of London.”

They think it highly unlikely they will be able to find somewhere to live. They continue:

“I am utterly disheartened that we live in a country where this is possible. It is nothing short of an outrage.”

There is much in this Bill that is good. There are elements promised for this Bill that are not here and that we will want to press on, and there are a number of concerns we will want to press on in Committee to probe the Government. The central point is this: tenant insecurity is extremely damaging. It is bad for mental and physical health, it is expensive and it places pressure on local authorities. The longer that measures are delayed, the worse it will be. The Government have broken their promise, and we will be holding them to account for that failure.

**Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con)**: This is without doubt a significant Bill, which shows that the Conservative Government are serious about delivering our manifesto commitments and delivering for the British people. In my constituency, tackling homelessness and rough sleeping is a key priority. To make in-roads, we must reform the private rental market. Many of my constituents and people across the country are trapped in high rental spirals, with little or no other viable options available to them. On that basis, the Bill's proposal to enable tenants to appeal excessive market rents designed to force out tenants could be an important step, but we need to ensure we see more detail on how that would work in practice.

On top of that, and more broadly, we must go back to these proposals and make sure that they do not let up on the delivery of more affordable housing and social housing. The Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) has heard me say that time and again. I believe there is a consensus across the House on that point. As the Bill progresses, I will be keeping a strong look-out for the appropriate protections for renters, but we cannot forget that without landlords, we would not have a rental market at all. That is why we need to strike the right balance between assurances for landlords and protections for renters. The tendency to vilify landlords is not just unhelpful to our public discourse; it is unhelpful to how we are developing legislation. We must make sure that we look after landlords in this process; they form a critical part of the housing ecosystem, and scaring them off would set us back even further, so we must tread carefully.

Through my role as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for housing market and housing delivery, and from meeting landlords and tenants in my constituency, I have engaged with a huge range of stakeholders, including professional landlords such as Grainger and charities such as Shelter. Through those discussions, I am aware of the sticking points that we need to resolve as we progress this Bill through its remaining stages.

To get into just one of the details—I know we are pushed for time—Grainger and others in the industry favour the idea of introducing the ability for landlords to request a six-month minimum tenancy length. Once that period is over, renters could issue a two-month notice. Responsible landlords such as Grainger—and many others; in fact, the vast majority of them—want to build communities and have lasting bonds with the people they house, which is an often forgotten point in these debates. Conversely, charities that I have been talking to that fight for the side of tenants and renters, such as Shelter, want to see a longer protected period for tenants, with a focus on open-ended tendencies. They want to see the protected period lengthened from six months to two years to give renters more certainty and security. In the light of proposals to introduce comprehensive possession grounds for landlords, we need to be careful that we find a compromise between the two positions.

The reforms proposed in the Bill are promising, and I think we can all accept that they are a step in the right direction. However, there is more work to be done in finding the right balance between the needs of renters and landlords and successfully integrating the rental market with our levelling-up plans and the need to deliver more affordable housing across our country.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)**: I call Feryal Clark—not here. That is a shock.

**Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab)**: I join colleagues across the House in welcoming this long-overdue Bill and share their dismay at the delay in implementing a ban on no-fault evictions. Renters have been left with soaring rents and disrepairs, and are at the complete mercy of landlords, powerless under the current system of no-fault evictions to demand fair rents and humane living conditions.

This is a massive housing emergency. Across the country, renters of all ages and backgrounds—from students to families, young couples and single retirees—are struggling to pay their rent, let alone save for a deposit to buy. Only half of private renters have any savings in their name. With a desperate lack of social housing, Liverpool alone has more than 15,000 applicants on the council's housing register and almost 1,000 households in temporary accommodation. The frontline housing options and homelessness service is seeing nearly 400 new approaches a month. Councils are relying on the private rented sector as the only way to ease the pressures on the system, and renters are left with no viable options.

An entire generation have been betrayed by the Tories, with 13 years of austerity and rising rents, frozen wages and diminishing opportunities. On top of that, they have faced unprecedented challenges caused by the financial crash, recessions, the pandemic and, now, the cost of living crisis. Thirteen years of Tory attacks on workers' and tenants' rights have left renters facing soaring insecurity and plummeting conditions. We urgently need the Bill to be passed into law to begin to redress some of the worst impacts of the deregulation.

Nearly five years since the Government proposed to outlaw no-fault evictions and give renters desperately needed protection from exploitative landlords, some 70,000 households have been threatened with homelessness by section 21 notices. Homelessness has skyrocketed during the last year, with the number of households in England who became homeless or were at risk of homelessness up 7% in the year to March. Each day that we delay, 172 families are handed a no-fault eviction notice. We cannot wait for improvements in the courts; renters need protection now.

In my constituency, as across the country, we have increasingly seen private landlords using no-fault evictions to turf out tenants on fixed-term contracts in order to hike up rents in line with soaring market rates. Not content with waiting out one-year or two-year-long contracts to raise rents and bolster profits, landlords are taking advantage of the cost of living crisis to line their pockets while tenants are turfed out with nowhere to go. Citizens Advice has found that a shocking 46% of renters who complain about their conditions receive a section 21 notice within six months. Research by Shelter supports that, with its findings showing that private renters in England who complain about poor conditions are 2.5 times more likely to be handed an eviction notice.

Ending pernicious section 21 evictions is a major step in rebalancing power in favour of tenants, but there are a number of areas where we need to go further to ensure that the Bill's measures have their intended consequences, as called for by the Renters Reform Coalition of the 20 leading housing organisations. First, we must increase the notice period from two months to at least four months: a move that will drastically reduce the number of people made homeless as a result of evictions. We must also protect renters from eviction for the first two full years of tenancy, not the six months proposed. We must introduce strong safeguards to prevent abuse of the new grounds for eviction, including a financial incentive for tenants to prevent abuse, and a one-year ban on re-letting a property after invoking new landlord circumstances on the grounds for eviction. Courts must be given maximum discretion to identify reasons why an eviction should not take place, and a cap on in-tenancy rent increases in line with inflation and wage growth must be introduced to prevent unaffordable rent increases being used as a way to evict tenants via the back door. Lastly, we need action to raise local housing allowance in line with inflation to prevent renters on benefits from being penalised by rising rents, and local authorities must be given extra financial support to take action on rogue landlords.

Everyone deserves a safe and secure home. The Government must bring the Bill into law immediately, with the additional safeguards that Members have outlined, to deliver desperately needed robust legislation that protects renters.

**Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con)**: I am pleased to rise to speak on Second Reading of a Bill that fulfils a manifesto promise and introduces a number of measures ensuring that renters get a fairer deal and more protections while maintaining landlords' essential control over their properties. Acknowledging that there are both good landlords and tenants—there are problematic ones as well—we must strike a careful balance. Therefore, as well as abolishing section 21 evictions and moving to a simpler structure where tenancies are periodic to empower renters and provide them with more certainty, the Bill introduces reforms to ensure that repossessions where tenants are at fault are easier, such as in cases of repeated, frequent arrears or antisocial behaviour.

The majority of landlord-tenant relationships work well, but, where they break down, early and effective dispute resolution is crucial. The new private rented sector ombudsman will be able to provide impartial and binding resolution to issues. However, it is not a full replacement for the court system. Therefore, His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service must be ready for the changes. I welcome that some of that has already been raised, indicating that there will be: more digitising of the court process to make it simpler and easier for landlords to use; prioritising of certain cases, such as those including antisocial behaviour, which can be a significant issue for landlords and tenants alike in my constituency; and the provision of early legal advice and better signposting for tenants, including to help them find a housing solution that meets their needs. I urge the Minister to work at pace with the Justice Secretary so that we can bring forward these measures as soon as possible.

My constituents in Cheadle are animal lovers, so I welcome that the Bill will give tenants the right to request having a pet in their property. Landlords will be required to consider those requests and unable to refuse them unreasonably.

**Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con)**: My hon. Friend is making an important point. The people of Southend West are great animal lovers, and many have written to me to say that they have not been allowed to have a pet in a private rented property—what a terrible thing that is for their mental health. In Southend, I have met the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and been told heartbreaking tales of people having to give up their pets. Like her, I welcome the provisions in the Bill such that landlords cannot unreasonably refuse a request for a pet, but, likewise, landlords can demand that the tenant takes out insurance against any damage that a pet may do—a good balancing act. Does she agree that, given how important pets are to our physical and mental health, those provisions are to be much welcomed?

**Mary Robinson**: I certainly agree, and my hon. Friend has pre-empted many of my comments. It is heartbreaking for many people to part with their pets in order to have a roof over their heads. However, as we know, pets can sometimes cause damage and deterioration to a property, so it is important that landlords can insist on pet insurance to cover any damage caused as a result. However, for clarity, I would be grateful if the Minister could clear up a query from a constituent who expressed concerns to me about allowing pets in shared properties. In those circumstances, what will constitute a reasonable refusal—for instance, what if another resident with allergies or difficulties with animals complains? Will the Minister make sure that acceptable reasons for giving that refusal are made clear?

As the Secretary of State mentioned, the proposals have been examined in Committees. As a member of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, I have had the opportunity to look closely into reform of the private rented sector, examining the Government's proposals as set out in the White Paper, “A fairer private rented sector”. We heard from a wide range of stakeholders with views across the spectrum. The Committee found that there was considerable support for the proposal of introducing an ombudsman for the sector. Further, we heard evidence that many rogue landlords are not intentionally malicious but unaware of their obligations. We heard that supporters of the Bill hope it will be an effective place for resolution. Equally, there were concerns from landlords that it might create additional bureaucracy, and concerns from tenant groups that it may take away the ability to go to court. Reassurance about the ease of use of the dispute mechanism would be welcome.

Getting the balance right is crucial. Over the summer I met tenants, landlords and letting agents, such as Cheadle-based Stuarts Homes, which facilitates tenants and landlords on a daily basis. I am grateful to all my local residents, tenants and businesses for giving me their views. As with any legislation or policy, we must consider any unintended consequences and seek to balance the protection of tenants with the rights of landlords. I heard about potential issues with the debt respite scheme, also known as “breathing space”. It was introduced in 2021 to help those experiencing debt, and provides individuals with a 60-day period in which interest and charges on their debts are frozen and enforcement action from creditors is paused. That is paired with a requirement to seek professional support to create a repayment plan. The scheme will have come as a relief to many. However, I have listened to concerns that some tenants have misused it to prevent evictions in cases of long-standing non-payment of rent. The stress of non-payment of rent—sometimes for months on end—affects landlords, who are unable to take possession of their property and are owed thousands of pounds in rent, which they fear they will never recoup.

Meanwhile, I have constituents in Cheadle who are landlords operating student lets. They have expressed concerns about the abolition of fixed-term lets. I was told that it may prevent landlords from securing tenants ahead of time for the next academic year, thereby taking away certainty and security for both landlords and students, who want to know their housing situation is sorted ahead of time. I was given an example by a constituent of where rental agreements are shared and if a student leaves, the others are—in theory—liable for the extra share of rent. However, in practice, the student leaving finds a suitable replacement, the lease is transferred and the departing resident gets their deposit back. As such, my constituent feels that a move to rolling tenancies, as the Bill proposes, would be unsuitable for student lets. I am reassured that that is being considered again.

We also heard during sessions of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee that the changes could negatively impact the rental market, making it unattractive for landlords to let to students. I understand that the Secretary of State has plans to introduce a new ground for possession, which will facilitate short-term student tenancies, but the Committee—and my constituents —recommend giving consideration to retaining fixed terms for the student rental market. Although I am pleased that the Government recognise the unique position of student accommodation in the rental market, I ask them to look at doing that.

The Bill makes some much-needed changes, but I ask the Government to listen to the outstanding concerns raised by those directly affected—the tenants and the landlords. We must ensure that we do not create unintended negative consequences or further problems that negate the good work of the Bill. In closing, I reiterate my overall support for these measures, and I look forward to following the Bill as it moves through the legislative process.

**Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab)**: Almost 40% of my constituents are private renters, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to reflect their concerns. Of those, many are students—I think I have the largest number of students of any Member in the country—and I want to raise their concerns as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for students.

I was one of a cross-party group of 60 parliamentarians who wrote recently to the Secretary of State urging him to bring forward this legislation, so I am delighted that we have it. I did so primarily because of its promise to fulfil the Government's pledge to end no-fault section 21 evictions, so it is a bitter disappointment that the Government appear to have frustrated the hopes of tenants by kicking the abolition of section 21 notices down the road to some potentially distant future, after further changes to the courts system—something that I saw that the National Residential Landlords Association has celebrated in a statement today, as a result of its “extensive lobbying”. I hope that the Government will think again, or at least give us an assurance this evening of the date when they plan to fulfil the ambition for no-fault evictions.

I hope the Government will go further in delivering the promised new deal for private renters in other areas, because I share the concern of the Renters Reform Coalition that the Bill needs amending to ensure that the proposed “landlord circumstances” grounds for eviction do not become the new section 21. The tenant should be given four months' notice rather than two. There should be a one-year ban on re-letting after invoking the new landlord circumstances, rather than the proposed three months. We need stronger mechanisms than those proposed to stop unaffordable rent increases—of which we have heard examples already this evening—pricing tenants out and becoming the new section 21. We need to ensure that tenants can be confident in raising issues and making complaints without fear of retaliation. I hope that those issues will be considered seriously in Committee.

I want to raise the concerns of student renters. There is an exemption for purpose-built student accommodation, but many students live in the parts of the private rented sector that are covered by the Bill—around 45% of them, or 600,000 across England and Wales. Their voices have not been fully heard, which our all-party group has been trying to address. In May, we held a roundtable with student representatives from most of our major cities and many of our smaller towns. They agreed that there were many positive elements to the Bill, but raised issues that needed further clarification if it is to succeed for all renters.

I see that in his response to the Select Committee, the Secretary of State accepted the argument of landlords that

“the student market is cyclical and…landlords must be able to guarantee possession each year for a new set of tenants”.

He went on to state that

“we will introduce a new ground for possession to facilitate this.”

I understand that case, and it was reflected in some of the student voices that we heard, but we need to take care about how we do it because there is an underlying false assumption in the discourse around the issue that all students fit a traditional stereotype: on three-year undergraduate courses, wanting a 10-month contract and leaving their university town when they finish their studies. However, students are not homogeneous. Undergraduates and postgraduates have different requirements; there are 30-week programmes and 52-week programmes; some courses start at different times of the year and have a different cycle. There are mature and part-time students, students with families, estranged students, international students, graduate apprentices, those who stay on to study or work during vacation while their friends do not, and those who want to make their university house a permanent home.

Many students live in mixed households, with recent graduates or other non-students. It simply would not work to have people in a mixed household on a shared tenancy with different rights. A grounds for possession clause might protect the market, but a one-size-fits-all approach will not address the fact that not all students want properties that are cyclical with the standard undergraduate year. So we need a clear definition of a student and how grounds for possession will be implemented. I would welcome some acknowledgement from the Minister, in winding up this evening, that the Government have given consideration to those complexities in their proposals in relation to students.

We also have to recognise that the student market differs greatly across the country. Large cities are different from smaller towns, and urban and rural-based universities are different again. The Higher Education Policy Institute's study of the Scottish experience highlighted the risk in tourist areas, or in other areas with low supply and high rents, that not exempting students will encourage landlords to move out of student accommodation. Student representatives expressed concern to us about being priced out in some areas by young professionals. On the other hand, there are worries that exempting students in some areas will risk them becoming second class renters, attracting less scrupulous landlords into student accommodation because they are relatively unprotected tenants.

Student renters face many of the same issues as other renters and they deserve the same broad protections. They face specific issues, too. The raised with us the growing pressure they are under to view and sign tenancy agreements for a property earlier and earlier each year—often in this term, early in the academic session, before friendship groups are formed—leaving them locked into unwanted contracts. The Bill does not address that, but students felt that it should. There are other questions that need addressing if we are to exempt students. What happens if a renter's student status changes during the tenancy? How will the Bill address the issue of joint tenancies?

To conclude, I simply say to the Minister that we should not rush to exempt students from the protections in the Bill relating to no-fault evictions and keep them uniquely locked into fixed-term tenancies without careful consideration of the impact on all types of students in all parts of England and Wales. Even then, we need to ensure they continue enjoy the protections in the Bill. I hope the Minister will agree to meet the all-party parliamentary group for students, and student representatives, to hear our concerns.

**Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con)**: I must declare that I own half of a rental property with my wife and should therefore refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I want to start by talking about one of my favourite subjects in this place. I have often spoken in the House about the impact of second homes in my constituency. While they bring many economic benefits, we must also face the fact that quite often they turbocharge the market, pushing up prices and making home ownership simply a dream for many local people. It is no big secret that North Norfolk has the highest proportion of second homes in the country outside London. In addition, one in five properties are private rentals. However, with an increasing number of holiday lets and second homes for many local people, the availability of secure, long-term rentals is diminishing year on year. That is particularly worrying in a constituency such as mine.

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con)**: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, whose area I know well because—I declare an interest—I farm in his constituency. I also have rental properties. What he is saying is absolutely correct. The Bill will have a disastrous effect on areas such as his and mine, reducing the number of rental properties and therefore increasing the price of rent. For youngsters, that is really serious.

**Duncan Baker**: I thank my hon. Friend for intervening. I do not agree at all, actually. In constituencies like mine, people have a real problem with the security of rental property. If they are evicted, it is virtually impossible for them to find somewhere else to rent in a short space of time at the moment. I deal with queries about that all the time, but I will come on to that in just a moment.

It is worrying that for so many who are looking to settle down in a family home of their own, renting is becoming the only option due to rising house prices. For example, on Friday I bumped into a local estate agent in one of my biggest towns, North Walsham. He told me he has 25 applicants for every rental property that comes on to the market. The demand is just off the scale. Clearly, that is a really huge problem. There is simply not enough rental market security when demand is rising as it is.

Now, clearly I am a Conservative and I am not against people wanting to purchase property in Norfolk as a second home. If one works hard in life, one should have the choice to spend one's finances as one wishes. But I also believe that when the market begins to fail, intervention is sometimes necessary and that is where we are at the moment. Many second homes, for instance, are left vacant for large parts of the year, reducing the property pool and once again reducing the availability of homes for residents to rent. Although holiday lets and vacant second homes are not the focus of my speech today, following conversations I have had with many of my constituents, especially Jane Platt, whom I met when she came all the way from North Norfolk to Parliament back in March, I know how unsettled and insecure tenants can feel in the sector as it currently stands. That fear is exacerbated in areas such as North Norfolk, because if a landlord decides to serve an eviction notice, given everything I have just said, there would simply be so little choice available for renters who need to find a new home quickly. Indeed, sadly, just in the four years I have been in this place, I have tried to help many desperate families find a suitable home to rent. That is at the pinnacle of why I support the Bill.

The Government are trying to help. Many initiatives have come forward; I was a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities for a short period of time. Doubling council tax on second homes, planning changes for short-term rentals and now this Bill show that the Government are committed to fulfilling their manifesto commitment to introduce reforms that will provide families across the UK with that extra reassurance that they will be able to settle into a family home and be free from, in certain cases, unfair evictions and, in very limited circumstances, landlords who do not act in a correct way. Many landlords and tenants are good, honest and decent people; they are the norm. The private landlord is, in my view, the answer to the rental crisis we face, but only if they are incentivised properly, for example with tax reforms. I gently suggest that in some regards we could go further with some of the Government's proposals to ensure that good and decent tenants feel secure in the private rental sector and feel they can put down roots. It might not be a big issue for some Members, but as others have said, enabling someone to have a pet in their home, as I allow, is certainly right in the 21st century when so many people treat a family pet as a part of their family.

There is large support across the board for the Government's current proposals, and I am not suggesting that they are materially changed. However, I believe there are some valid conversations to be had around increasing notice periods from two to four months to give people time to find a new home. I have said it before, but in my constituency and in many others—for instance, in the south-west—I doubt anyone could find another rental property in two months, such is the enormous shortage. In addition, I would potentially improve the protected period at the start of the tenancy from six months to at least a year, as well as making all grounds discretionary rather than mandatory so that a court can take into account a tenant's circumstances before granting possession. Above all—I have said this to various Ministers before—why can we not incentivise long-term landlords to return to the market by offering mortgage interest relief on long-term tenancies? In a constituency such as mine, so many people offer short-term rentals in their holiday cottages and on Airbnb, but if we could switch those people to offering long-term tenancies on their properties by giving them mortgage interest relief, it would fundamentally change the situation overnight and give more renters market security. It would seriously improve the amount of rental stock we have available.

I appreciate the need to safeguard landlords from antisocial tenants and to allow them to get their properties back when needed; we have heard that this evening. However, the tightening of some of the Government's proposals would not cause an exodus of landlords from the sector or prevent them doing what they wish with their asset. As I said before, I own a part-share and I do not have any fear at all. When a landlord has a good relationship with their tenant, that is how it works—operating good relationships. Generally, people who are trying to rent are decent people. Creating a fairer, more secure and thriving rental sector is achievable, and this Bill is the first step.

**Several hon. Members rose—**:

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)**: Order. Just for the sake of clarity, let me say that I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker). He took the correct allotted time. There seems to be a mistake with the clock, but the hon. Gentleman has done the honourable thing, and I thank him very much for that.

**Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD)**: Let me first draw Members' attention to my own entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am also half a residential landlord.

The Bill has taken far too long to reach this stage. It is more than four years since the Government's manifesto pledge, and now, in the dying months of the current Parliament, the Bill has only just reached Second Reading. Broadly, however, my Liberal Democrat colleagues and I support it, and will vote for it this evening. Any legislation that paves the way towards a fairer situation for both renters and landlords must be welcome. Most important is the end of no-fault evictions, and I shall say more about that shortly. We also welcome clauses that will allow renters to keep pets in their homes, and the creation of a housing ombudsman, which will enable decisions to be made more quickly and cheaply for tenants and landlords.

Security for both tenants and landlords is vital, and it is essential that in providing that security for tenants, we do not inadvertently cause an exodus of landlords from the rental market. The Country Land and Business Association has found that 44% of landlords plan to sell or change the use of their rental properties in the next two years, which is cause for concern because at the same time we are seeing an increase in the number of people entering the private rental market. Rightmove estimates that for every property advertised for rent there are 24 applicants, whereas there were just eight in 2019. We need to ensure that we are incentivising landlords to stay in the market and to give renters security once they manage to become that one person in 24 to secure a property to rent.

The length of rental tenancies is an important element in that regard. In its current form, the Bill introduces rolling tenancies without specified end dates. That provides considerable security for tenants, but the six-month protected period is potentially too short. Meanwhile, 43% of landlords do not have a portfolio of properties; they have just one, so the risk of empty months is significant for them. Providing longer-term tenure might alleviate that risk and remove an incentive for landlords to exit the market. The Liberal Democrats' proposal is to extend the default tenancy from one to three years, and, during that three-year period, only to allow rents to increase by the rate of inflation. That would give both renters and landlords greater stability.

As I mentioned earlier, the Liberal Democrats welcome the banning of section 21 or no-fault evictions. I am sure that Members on both sides of the House have had an enormous amount of casework featuring, for many renters, a sudden and drastic upheaval in their everyday life caused by a section 21 eviction. Such evictions leave people stressed about their security of tenure and worried about not having somewhere to call their home, and can pull the rug from under their feet. They can require people to move to a new area, forcing them to find new schools for their children or new jobs for themselves and try to settle into new communities. That is particularly significant at present, because more families than ever are living in private rented accommodation, and, according to the Renters Reform Coalition, 1.8 million renter households include children.

The Government's commitment to abolish those types of eviction and legislate for landlords to be able to evict only in “reasonable circumstances” is therefore a welcome step towards ensuring that renters' rights are protected in law. It will also ensure that tenants living in properties suffering from disrepair or even infestation can report such issues to their landlords without the fear of a “revenge eviction”. It should drive up standards, particularly if coupled with longer tenancies. As always, however, there is a balance to be struck between providing security for tenants and ensuring that the legislation does not cause an exodus of landlords from the sector. It remains important for landlords to be able to remove tenants who are genuinely damaging their property or the surrounding community, but I hope that the Minister will make the definition of what will enable that to happen absolutely clear. It is also important to guard against landlords being able to use flimsy excuses to evict tenants, allowing section 21 evictions to continue in all but name.

I hope that the Minister will elaborate on the reform of the legal system that will be necessary to allow landlords to evict when there is non-payment of rent, unreasonable damage to property or clearly defined antisocial behaviour, or a genuine change in a landlord's circumstances. A prompt and fair court process is obviously essential to retaining landlord confidence in a reformed system, but delays in that process should not be used as a mechanism to kick this important legislation into the long grass.

The quality of rental housing must also be considered. Black mould, damp, faulty boilers—I am sure we are all aware of the difficult conditions that some rental properties are left in. I say “some” with great seriousness, because not all private landlords leave their properties in disrepair, but we must make the Bill robust enough to challenge those who do. The Government have previously promised to introduce legislation at the earliest opportunity to apply the decent homes standard to the private rented sector. I find it concerning that that legislation has not been introduced, and the Government have instead announced that they will delay the requirements that will force private landlords to meet energy performance certificate standards.

I understand the cautious approach in ensuring stability of supply in the private rented sector, but responsible landlords should not baulk at taking measures over a reasonable timescale that will enhance the value of their asset. I also understand the concern about the usefulness of the EPC, but it should be possible to revisit that and phase in a more effective measure of energy efficiency rather than abandoning it altogether, providing certainty and a fixed timetable that landlords should be able to work to. Without such measures, the Bill risks offering rogue landlords an easy escape route when it comes to improving the quality of the properties.

The Bill is better late than never, but I urge the Government to revisit the issue of length of tenancy, to clarify the circumstances in which, and the legal process through which, a landlord would legitimately be able to evict a problematic tenant or sell the property, and to consider including a decent homes standard so that those renting privately can be sure of a safe and warm home for themselves and their families.

Let me end by calling for a rapid increase in the building of social housing, because a shortage of supply is behind all these issues in the private rented sector, and it leaves far too much power in the hands of landlords.

**Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con)**: I have no financial interest in the Bill. I am not a landlord, have never been one, and have no desire to be one. It sounds like a very stressful job. However, I do declare a personal interest, because I am the father of young people in their 20s and 30s, and I am increasingly worried about their lack of opportunities to buy their own home, or indeed rent a home. My generation was fortunate in experiencing full employment, a buoyant housing and rental market, and low levels of net migration. I was able to buy my first house—although it was a bit of a struggle—for £25,000.

The opportunities for young people are so difficult now. and I think they should be at the forefront of our thoughts. They are overwhelmingly reliant on the rental sector for accommodation. The housing crunch means that they have to rent for a larger proportion of their lives, and the Government benchmark for an “unaffordable” level of rent is 30% of income. As of last year, four in 10 under-30s in England, Scotland and Wales are now paying rents that the Government consider “unaffordable”. The crisis is driven by a massive shortage of supply. Policies such as Help to Buy only help to increase demand, while doing nothing when it comes to supply. Only massive, comprehensive planning reform can solve this problem. We have to build many more houses, and we have to free up the rented sector.

We need a public-spirited mentality. Many older people have worked hard and have purchased their homes, but they are undermining the ability of younger people to do the same by objecting to new housing proposals—and, of course, when they object, they are also objecting to the ability of their own children and grandchildren to get on to the housing market. Much opposition to new housing is due to the fact that it is often poorly built, and developments lack the upscaling in infrastructure that is needed to support it. We need to adopt a holistic approach. The housing shortage means that first-time buyers have little to choose from, and delays them from getting on to the property ladder. Young people's wages have not kept up with the rising cost of living and housing. They are forced to spend more and more of their money on rent, leaving less room for savings, paying off debt, and spending money which will flow into the general economy. Rent increases are outpacing wage growth in most of the UK.

I know that many Members, and rental reformers, have argued in favour of getting rid of no-fault evictions to help give renters security, but I believe the reality is the opposite. Banning no-fault evictions will make the rental market even more stagnant, and will lead to its drying up further. I urge the Government, if the Bill becomes law—as I am sure it will, with Labour support—to allow a cooling-off period so that over the next year, more and more landlords do not just get out of the sector altogether. Apart from adding to the burden of landlords, we do not want to see what happened when Ireland did this. The regulatory burden on landlords there was such that the rental sector shrank massively and Governments have paid the price in terms of popularity. The number of available properties for rent in Ireland has shrunk to a record low. A temporary eviction ban there ended at the end of March this year and did nothing to alleviate the shortage.

No-fault evictions are in some sense a legal fiction. Evicting a tenant for fault is a complex process and the burden is on the landlord to prove a breach of tenancy, arrears of rent, nuisance or antisocial behaviour, criminal activity or substantial disrepair. Depending on the tenancy, the notice period could be as short as two weeks or as long as several months. Notice procedures are highly regulated and must observe the prescribed format. Failure to observe this down to the letter of the law can render a notice invalid, delaying eviction. If the premises are not vacated, it is up to the landlord to initiate costly legal proceedings.

Let us look at what happened in the past. In 1952, under Harold Macmillan as Housing Minister, more than 270,000 new dwellings were completed. In 2019, the year before the pandemic, just 213,000 new dwellings were built. In the statistical year ending March 2019, 612,000 people came to live in the UK, with 385,000 emigrating from the UK. That is a net migration figure of 227,000 people, on top of the housing shortage that already existed. The post-covid statistics are even worse. The Office for National Statistics estimates that net migration to the UK in 2022 was 606,000. The same year, energy performance certificate data suggests that just 252,000 homes were built. The number of people we are letting into the country is 2.4 times the number of new dwellings we are building. This is a crisis and it needs to be addressed.

This does not take into account the fact that even without these newcomers there is already a squeeze on housing. We welcome the fact that we had 174,000 Ukrainians coming here, and perhaps we have not done enough but we have also welcomed people from Afghanistan. No one is claiming that we should not have taken in these refugees in genuine need, but we need to be realistic. If we are letting in these people in need, we need to severely curtail other migration—not just illegal migration but legal immigration—in order to stay afloat and give our own young people a chance to buy and rent houses. Younger and less well-off people are being left to shoulder the burden.

House builders face complex and lengthy planning processes that slow down development, and I cannot agree with the Government on removing housing targets. We need to reimpose housing targets on local authorities and we need a massive house building drive. We need to give many more people the opportunity to rent and we need to control net migration. For all these reasons, I cannot support the Bill tonight.

**Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab)**: Today's Second Reading of the Renters (Reform) Bill is long overdue but, as many have already said, it unfortunately does not go far enough in many areas. Since the Government first promised to end section 21 no-fault evictions, 70,000 households have been evicted or threatened with homelessness. Everybody deserves to have a safe, decent and affordable home, but sadly, on the Tories' watch, mortgage bills and rents are soaring, fewer people can buy their own home and over 1 million people are still stuck on social housing waiting lists.

My constituency is one of the youngest in the country and has a higher number of private and social renters than the national average. Average house prices are more than £675,000, which is around 15 times the average annual salary, making it much harder for many to get on to the housing ladder. All too often, that leaves them trapped in the private rented sector. The Renters Reform Coalition has rightly asserted that:

“The private rented sector in England is characterised by poor standards, a lack of affordability, discrimination and”—

most importantly—

“insecurity.”

I regularly receive correspondence from constituents complaining about the poor living standards and eye-watering rents that they are facing. That is why I asked the Secretary of State earlier why he would not bring forward provisions in the Bill to address the issues around decent standards. Renters have never been so exposed or so desperately in need of Government action to establish a fairer, more secure and more affordable private rented sector.

In London, private rents rose by over 6% in the year to this September, which is the highest for over a decade. The average rent in London is the equivalent of 40% of the average household income, compared with just 26% across England. The lack of protections for renters is playing a huge role in these trends. That is why reform of this sector is vital, but more needs to be done to protect renters and to ensure that they can live in a home that is safe, decent and affordable.

The Bill as it stands does nothing to address the cost of renting, which has skyrocketed. It contains no requirements for privately rented homes to meet the decent homes standard or provisions to increase councils' investigative and enforcement powers. The Bill will eventually remove section 21 no-fault evictions, but it still has many issues. Renters will be protected from eviction only for the first six months of their tenancy, rather than the two years that many across the sector have been calling for. They will be entitled to receive only two months' notice of an eviction rather than four months, which would give them more security, and landlords will be banned from reletting a property after evicting tenants on new grounds for only three months rather than for a year. While the Bill strengthens the law to ensure that landlords can increase rents only once a year, the mechanism for tenants to contest increases that are too high is not strong enough. We need to see a cap on tenancy rent increases at either the lowest end of inflation or wage growth.

I also want to touch on pets in private rented homes. This is an issue I have been working on with Battersea Dogs and Cats Home in my constituency, and an issue that many of my constituents have been writing to me about. It is something that they care about. For many people, their pets bring them physical, mental and social health benefits as they are an integral part of many family units. It is vital that we ensure that clauses 7 and 8 are protected in the Bill, so that tenants have a legal right to request a pet in the property and the landlord must consider that request and not refuse it unnecessarily.

This Bill alone will not solve the housing crisis in the private rented sector, and the Government must look at wholesale reform of the sector. Labour has committed, once in government, to increasing the affordable housing supply, and the Mayor of London has already invested over £3 billion in building genuinely affordable homes. There is so much more that the Government can do. They could look at unfreezing the local housing allowance and restoring the link between the LHA and rising rents. It has been frozen for too many years and it is totally out of step with the cost of renting for many in this sector. Shelter has shown that low-income renters are being forced to find, on average, an additional £648 for a one-bedroom property, which is virtually impossible for many.

This Bill only scratches the surface on fixing the housing emergency created by the Conservatives. To protect our constituents, more needs to be done in every way to ensure that everybody has a safe, decent and affordable home to live in. This is the level of ambition that we need, but unfortunately it has been missing from this Government.

**Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con)**: I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Looking at the housing market, we know that the problem is when people feel insecure. Generally speaking, those who own their own home or who are in council housing feel secure, but the private rented sector, because it is focused on very short-term lets, causes a problem. A one-year tenancy is not a problem for a mobile young man, but if he has a family, with children at school and work in the locality, and if he is unlucky enough to have gone from one private landlord to another, over half a dozen years, before being evicted, it will have a major effect on the family's life chances. The kids might not be able to go to school, they might have a longer bus ride, and sometimes their exams might be affected. Sometimes parents have to change jobs.

It is laudable for the Government to try to lengthen tenancies in order to provide a little more security for those in the private rented sector, but I am not sure whether the formula in this Bill will actually do that. Like some of my colleagues, I am somewhat sceptical. There is quite a lot of room to improve the Bill.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) said, the Bill would probably be more effective if landlords were incentivised to keep tenants for longer by being able to claim their mortgage interest against tax. We would then end up with a market that is much more logical and better for tenants who want a long-term, secure tenancy. In other words, a fiscal intervention would be more likely to succeed than many of the interventions the Government are currently suggesting.

Of course, as many Members have said, one solution is to build more houses—more for people to buy and more for council housing. It is bizarre that some local authorities have got into trouble buying shopping centres and PV farms when, actually, the money would have been much better spent on providing people with a decent home. We all know that our local authorities spend a lot of money on putting people in temporary accommodation, with possibly only a microwave to heat their food. Investment in homes, which is good for people's mental wellbeing and their children's upbringing, should be the priority of any Government, rather than being a question of right or left. As a Government, we ought to focus more on building than on messing about with managing the housing market.

I am concerned that some things in the Bill may well put off private landlords. I sometimes feel that private landlords have a thankless task. They tend to get kicked by everybody, even though they are trying to do the right thing. Fundamentally, if we make it more difficult for landlords to get their property, they will think twice before renting it out. We have to be extremely careful when we legislate in this area, because the consequence of making it more difficult for private owners is that we may well end up with more people being evicted and more people falling on the council for a home.

The Secretary of State introduced the Bill with his usual panache, but I was amazed that two large areas have not really been included. First, the Bill will not work for student accommodation and, in fact, could have very perverse incentives. The hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) is an expert in this sector, and he made some interesting observations. He asked what would happen, if we had this system and tried to introduce a separate system for students, where a student lives with somebody who is in work. There are all sorts of difficulties that the Bill will have to iron out.

It is vital that those who have invested in property near our universities—our universities seem to be property companies, as far as I can see—have the certainty of one year moving on when another year comes in, in good time, so that people can sort out their accommodation. We really should tell people what we are doing when we introduce a Bill, rather than waiting for what might come out during the Bill's passage.

My other concern is about moving from section 21, which is clearly a blunt instrument, to the courts. We currently have a major backlog in our courts, on which I think they are making some progress, but the Bill will inevitably slow down the process for landlords. The Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), suggested that perhaps there ought to be property courts to fast-track the complaints. There are all sorts of issues.

Throughout most of my parliamentary career, when people have come to my surgery to say that they are going to court, I have tended to say, “Don't do it.” In this instance the Government are trying to get people to go into the legal system, and I worry that it will take longer. I worry whether this is the right solution for either tenants or property owners. Have the Government done a proper assessment? Are we confident that the system will work? The Bill has been introduced on a promise that it will be sorted out, but the courts are the responsibility of another Department, not the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. I worry about that.

This Bill is not fully formed, but I think it could be improved. It is one of those Bills for which Committee consideration will be vital. I will support the Government tonight, but I will be looking very carefully at how the Bill is improved as it goes through this House.

**Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab)**: For my constituents in Liverpool, West Derby, and for millions across the country, the private rented sector is the only housing option available because of the disastrous turning away from the post-war mass council house provision. Those long-term political decisions have led us to our current crisis.

The private rented sector has utterly failed to provide homes that are decent, affordable and allow people to live in safety, security and dignity. More than one in 10 privately rented homes contains a category 1 hazard that could kill or seriously maim, and tenants who raise complaints are two and a half times more likely to be handed an eviction notice, which often leads to a forced move that is disruptive to the family and to children's education.

Local authorities have had their resources and capabilities decimated under the Government's austerity programme. This morning alone, three families in West Derby have contacted my office after being given an eviction notice by a private landlord, with housing provision scant in Liverpool.

I have previously raised in the House the case of my constituent with asthma whose landlord left him in a damp property with no gas supply in the middle of winter. I have raised the cases of constituents, including children, who were hospitalised and suffered serious health impacts as a result of disrepair in privately rented homes, and cases of families living in fear of bailiffs, having been served a section 21 notice by their landlord after complaining about terrible conditions in their home. One constituent said, “Section 21 takes the humanity out of the situation and that's precisely the problem—we are humans and our lives are being carelessly destroyed!”

Since I raised these cases a year and a half ago, my constituents have seen no changes to the law, so we finally welcome the Second Reading of the Renters (Reform) Bill, which we hope might at least bring an end to the nightmare of section 21 no-fault evictions. The delays to the Bill have been shameful. Nearly a quarter of a million private renters have been served with no-fault eviction notices since the Government first pledged to ban them in April 2019. During the delay between First Reading and Second Reading alone, Citizens Advice has had to help more than 10,500 people with section 21 evictions.

The Secretary of State has now said:

“Implementation of the reforms in this bill won't proceed until further improvements are in place and HMCTS is fully prepared for these changes.”

How long will that take? Can the Secretary of State explain how this commitment will be reflected in legislation?

My constituents and hundreds of thousands of others have zero faith that they will ever see a ban on section 21 evictions under this Government, because they have seen 13 years of the Government's complete destruction of the justice system, which has caused so much damage to those seeking justice in so many sections of society, including housing. I sit on the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee. From the Secretary of State's response to the Committee's report, it feels as if the ideological destruction of the justice system by his Government is now being used as a cover to bow down to the lobbying from landlords—many of them seem to be on his Back Benches—and to kick the ban of section 21 into the long grass.

Added to that are the concerns of tenants, unions and charities, who welcome the ban on section 21 evictions but are concerned that the Bill will replace section 21 with potential loopholes for landlords to evict tenants under other terms that are unfair or extremely vaguely defined. They are also concerned that landlords will continue to be able, in effect, to evict tenants by raising rents to unsustainable levels. I hope that the Secretary of State will address those fears and loopholes when the Bill is in Committee.

This Bill should be an opportunity to empower tenants and hardwire social justice into the system. So many people are looking to the Bill to rebalance the scales of justice, which are weighted so heavily against tenants and so in favour of profit. Any delay in bringing in a no-loopholes ban on section 21 evictions really is unforgivable. A nation awaits.

**Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con)**: I refer hon. Members to my declaration on the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I have been a landlord for 20-plus years. I should also note that I have been a tenant, too.

A wise man once said:

“The first lesson of economics is scarcity: there is never enough of anything to fully satisfy all those who want it.”

He also said:

“The first lesson of politics is to disregard the first lesson of economics.”

Whenever this is the case, there are disastrous consequences. We see this every time Labour is elected. Who among us will ever forget the note that Labour left us in 2010? It said:

“I'm afraid there is no money. Kind regards—and good luck!”

As Conservatives, we understand the importance of sound economics and trying not to interfere with the market, yet I am concerned that this Bill may be guilty of just that. The Bill could well result in fewer properties to rent, and in sky-high rents.

I thank the Secretary of State for meeting me in Edlington in my constituency. I showed him at first hand the problems that landlords and constituents are facing as a result of the decades of neglect that the area has faced under Doncaster's Labour-controlled council. I am still hopeful that levelling-up funding will help to transform this part of my constituency. I have written a plan for Edlington, which I know my right hon. Friend has read. On a positive note, he will be pleased to know that his visit has bucked up all the stakeholders: they are now beginning to address issues that I have raised. My constituents are very grateful, as am I.

I also thank the Secretary of State for his recent letter to me, in which he announced changes that he has made to the Bill. They were needed. That proves that the Secretary of State is willing to listen, but there remain many issues that need addressing. The simple fact of the matter is that the more bureaucratic and difficult we make renting for landlords, the more incentive they will have to sell up and reduce the number of properties on the market to let. With fewer properties for rent, scarcity means that rents will increase. Is that what tenants want? We should be helping landlords and tenants equally, not one over the other. Savills has carried out research on the issue, and tens of thousands of landlords are doing just that: selling up. More are expected to follow.

There are those who say, “So what if the landlord sells? What is all the worry? The house is going nowhere. If it is sold, an owner-occupier or another landlord will buy it.” They are right—and if an owner occupier does buy it, that is fine. But if good landlords cannot make a property pay, they may just sell to an unscrupulous landlord who will make it pay. Is that what we seek to do: to make the property market so costly and so bureaucratic that only the cowboy landlords can make it pay? I do hope not.

By bringing this Bill forward, the Government will inadvertently increase the rents that many of my constituents are paying. No doubt that will reduce the quality of the properties, too. That cannot be right. Trying to protect any increases in rent by allowing only annual increases will no doubt result in landlords putting up the rent each year. It makes sense: that is what happens when the market is interfered with. Yet, prior to the scheme coming into effect, many landlords have allowed good tenants to pay rent at the same rate, year on year.

Rolling tenancies give neither the landlord nor the tenant any security. To allow notice to be given from day one is, I am afraid, nothing short of ludicrous. I am not sure whether the Secretary of State has ever had to try and find new tenants. Tidying up a property after the last tenant absconded is a job in itself, and then there is advertising the property, dealing with scores of viewings and dealing with agreements, deposit schemes and so on. To go through all that and then allow a tenant to give notice on day one and leave after two months is, as I say, ludicrous.

I can understand the attraction of an ombudsman and a database, but we must be realistic: this will only add costs. Either that will be another reason for a landlord to quit the sector, or it will increase the tenant's rent. Tenants should see that these proposals will end up costing them hundreds of pounds every month.

I am sure the Government's intentions are honourable, but the fact remains that although the Bill may initially look favourable to many, it simply is not. We should be careful not to follow the socialist path. Many socialist policies look good for politicians; that is why they win elections, but that failure to understand the market and basic economics is why they always end up bankrupting the country. Conservative Members understand economics and want to do the right thing for the right reason, no matter how it looks. That is the reason I am a Conservative.

I ask the Government again to listen to the industry and to meet me once more. Let us not do what that wise man Thomas Sowell said of politicians, and disregard the first lesson of economics. The outcome will always be worst for those who can least afford it, which will be many of my constituents.

**Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab)**: The housing system is rigged against renters. In Britain today, on average, private renters spend about a third of their incomes on rent—on properties that are disproportionately in shoddy conditions, where problems such as damp and mould are rife—and things are getting worse. Rents have soared to record highs and have gone up 33% outside London in the past four years. Homes in England are, on average, not only the smallest in Europe, but in the worst condition and among the least affordable.

The rights that renters have to live in these often overpriced, overcrowded and unsafe homes are pathetically weak. With a no-fault eviction notice handed to a private renter every three minutes, many renters are forced into homelessness. Research shows that renters are so worried about the risk of being evicted that they often do not ask their landlord for vital repairs or challenge grossly unfair rent hikes.

In my constituency, I recently had a case that highlighted the need for stronger renters' rights and the abolition of no-fault evictions. Having lived in her home for 15 years, Mandy and her two sons were issued with a no-fault eviction, giving them just two months to find a new home. As Mandy said,

“the threat of eviction is so stressful. The thought of having to move my family into temporary accommodation away from our community has kept me up at night.”

This was particularly difficult for one of her young sons, who is disabled and has complex needs. With the family on the brink of homelessness and bailiffs turning up, the community tenants union ACORN stepped in and supported Mandy and her family, which allowed more time to find a new home. I am pleased to say that, with the eviction delayed, they found a new home, but not everyone is so lucky.

That is why no-fault evictions need to be banned. Although on paper that is what the Bill says it will do, I share colleagues' concerns. Not only is the Bill filled with loopholes, giving unscrupulous landlords opportunities to get round the scrapping of no-fault evictions, but today it was revealed that the Government will indefinitely delay introducing the ban, promising that it will come into effect only after court reforms have been implemented —and who knows when that will happen? Of course, this delay has been welcomed by the landlord lobby—and no doubt by many landlords on the Government Benches.

The Government promised a new deal for private renters, with quality, affordability and fairness at its heart, but this Bill is far too little, far too late. Renters do not just need a real, watertight ban on no-fault evictions; they need rent caps and an end to ever soaring rent rises. They need an end to the Thatcherite right to buy and the privatisation of council homes, which has seen two thirds of council homes sold off and almost half being bought up by private landlords, only to be leased out again at far higher rents. Renters also need a Government-led council house building programme to build hundreds of thousands of high-quality new homes—owned by the council, obviously—every year. Ultimately, we need a Government who shift the balance away from bad landlords and big property developers, in favour of renters and working-class communities.

**Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con)**: We have a mandate from the British people to deliver this Bill, and I know that passing it into law will be warmly welcomed by renters in the 4.6 million households who are renting nationwide. Support and fairness is what this Bill delivers, to both renters and landlords alike.

Last year, the English housing survey identified that 23% of privately rented properties do not meet the decent homes standard. The consequences of unsafe rental properties cost the NHS £340 million each year. I am sure that we can agree that this is an unnecessary cost, but it is made up of thousands upon thousands of individual stories of miserable living conditions.

From day one in this job—and sadly, week in and week out—much of my casework has involved poor housing conditions. Resolving these issues gives my caseworking team, Diana, Mollie and me, enormous satisfaction, but it is distressing to hear of the health impacts on vulnerable constituents. That was brought to the fore for all of us with the news at the beginning of the year of the death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak in Rochdale from respiratory issues caused by exposure to mould. I hope that we can all agree across the House that no family should suffer the loss of a child in that way. Fear of eviction should not be a reason for not asking for repairs to be done.

Since assured shorthold tenancies were introduced, renters have been offered no long-term security of tenure, and private landlords have been able to repossess their properties without any establishment of wrongdoing by the tenants. However, that is not to say that many landlords do not do an excellent job in delivering good-quality housing and support to their tenants, while exercising their rights properly and with good intention. The goal is to increase their number and for more landlords to follow their example.

A large number of my constituents in Guildford have written to me in support of the Bill, for many reasons, including the provisions that will give tenants the right to request a pet in their property and enable landlords to require pet insurance to cover any damages. My constituents think that is a great idea. As a pet owner, I wholly agree with them.

I have also been considering the issue of tenancy length, with students in Guildford in mind. There are some fundamentals that we need to get right. Landlords need full access to their properties after term finishes in the summer, to prepare them for their next tenants in the autumn. I am pleased that the Secretary of State gave reassurances on student lets in his opening speech.

Between 2010 and 2020, the Conservative Government reduced the number of non-decent private rental homes by 16%. The Secretary of State thinks we can go further, and so do I.

**Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab)**: I see the impacts of the lack of regulation in the private rented sector in my constituency every single week. In Dulwich and West Norwood, rents have been spiralling for many years, and all too often the quality of accommodation falls way below what any tenant should be able to expect.

I have in my constituency a landlord who owns 90 homes in a development called Dorchester Court. The landlord is on the *Sunday Times* rich list. Their properties are in an absolutely dire state. Wooden props support the window frames. Plastic sheeting acts as an ineffective shield against moisture penetrating the walls. The heating is unreliable in the winter. The water pipes are made from lead, which contaminates the water supply to a level that is not safe for human health. The council has been trying for a number of years to take enforcement action against this landlord, but it has been waiting many months for a court date. In the meantime, the same landlord has used section 21 eviction notices—in a way that, in my experience, is entirely common—simply to ratchet up rents. Tenants are served with a section 21 notice terminating the tenancy, alongside an offer of a new tenancy at a higher level—often a significantly higher level—of rent. If any Member doubts the need for additional regulation of the private rented sector, they should visit Dorchester Court in my constituency, and, in five minutes, they will see how the regulatory framework is failing tenants across the country.

Section 8 allows for landlords to get their property back when they have a legitimate reason to do so. Section 21 is a pernicious, destabilising force in the housing rental market and there is no place for it. The consequences of section 21 are more than simply contractual. They are found in poor mental health and anxiety, in increasing homelessness and financial hardship, in children living in accommodation that no child should have to live in, and in children having to worry about the anxiety that their parents are experiencing because of the possibility of losing their home at any time. It is very disappointing that the Government are delaying the ban on section 21 evictions by allowing a loophole in this legislation. I sincerely hope that, in Committee, they will reconsider their position.

I turn now to an amendment to the Bill that I plan to table. Earlier this year, my constituents lost their son, a first year university student, to suicide—a devastating loss for any parent to bear. Their son had signed a tenancy for his second-year accommodation and his parents had signed a guarantor agreement. After their son's death, they discovered that the guarantor agreement applied even in the event of his death, and the letting agent began pursuing them for the rent. It was rent for a tenancy that had not yet started and a tenancy that he would never take up. This is a shockingly punitive act against parents who were already suffering the worst possible loss.

In extensive correspondence with the letting agent on my constituents' behalf, it refused to budge, simply stating that the rent was a contractual obligation and, although it was unfortunate, my constituents were bound to its terms. I am grateful to the Minister for meeting me to discuss the issues raised by this case. She has explained that the Bill will enable any tenant to terminate a tenancy with two months' notice, but two months' rent is a financial penalty that no bereaved guarantor should have to pay. This type of clause is not in every guarantor agreement, and it is not necessary. Insurance policies can cover loss of rent in the event of the death of a tenant. I ask the Government to reconsider their position and, in Committee, to accept my amendment, which would straightforwardly outlaw the pursuit of guarantors for rent owed by a deceased tenant and stop any other family having to suffer this egregious additional pain, anxiety and hardship at a time of great sadness and vulnerability.

**Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con)**: Listening to this debate, I am surprised that we are being accused of dither and delay when 13 years of Labour government never produced a Bill such as this. However, that is for Labour Members to discuss and to wrestle with on their own terms.

I welcome the Bill and support its sentiment, but, as with all pieces of legislation that pass through this place, the devil is in the detail. The Minister and the Secretary of State have a trifecta on their hands. They must reassure Members in this place and in the House of Lords; reassure tenants; and reassure landlords, because, at the moment, I am not entirely sure that we are there. Just as not all tenants are bad tenants, not all landlords are bad landlords. We must make sure that what we provide in the Bill today, in Committee and on Third Reading will reassure both tenants and landlords and take them with us. As many Members have said, it is a balancing act of ensuring the rights of property ownership along with the rights of good, firm tenancies.

I have three areas on which to focus my remarks. The first is the removal of fixed terms—following the brilliant speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson), I shall also mention the unforeseen consequences, which she talked about. Perhaps I can give an example. My constituency has one of the largest second home and Airbnb markets in the country. Under the Government's proposal that tenants will be able to hand back a tenancy with a minimum of two months' notice, someone could come down, pretend that they are going to rent a house on the long-term rental market, go there for June, July and August, and then hand back the tenancy. With this clause, we would completely obliterate the long-term rental market because people would take advantage of it as a short-term letting market and then hand the property back.

The disparity in prices between the short-term let market and the long-term let market is unbelievably significant in south Devon. I hope that the Minister can reassure me on that point, because that is exactly what people will do. They will rent a house on the pretence that they will stay in it for a significant period, they will be there for the summer, and then they will give it back. That is what the clause allows. We have to ensure that the unforeseen consequences are addressed.

Unless the Minister can give me some reassurance, I worry deeply about what the long-term rental market will look like. At the moment, across south Devon only 70 homes are available for people to rent. We do not demonise landlords without risk. We need to incentivise people to put their houses into the long-term rental market so that they can provide that social value. That is exactly why the Country Land and Business Association has said that it thinks that the rural private housing sector is set to shrink, with 44% of landlords either selling their property or changing its usage class.

My second point is about court reform. I am distinctly uneasy about voting for a Bill that does not come with enforcement and arbitration measures. We have been here before. It is all very well to give a brilliant speech in this place, and clip it and put it on YouTube or Instagram, but if we do not address the legal mechanisms that are needed to enforce the measures, we do our constituents a disservice. It is part of the process in this place, and it worries me that the Government are suggesting that we vote blindly on a piece of legislation that does not have that enforcement mechanism in it.

As I have said, the devil is in the detail, so perhaps the Minister could tell us what the timeline will be for the full creation of the court system or arbitration system. How quickly will we see judgments come along? How will we look to expand the wording on antisocial behaviour, and what will the actual terminology be? When considering a Bill a few years ago, we had a very vague term for the acceptable level of noise. The people who had to enforce that were the police.

If we do not have specifics in our laws they end up being interpreted, sometimes for the better but more often for the worse. Again, I ask the Government to be clear about their laws and language, so that we can ensure that the Bill is drafted in the right way to help both tenants and landlords. I do not feel that this is particularly party political, or that many people from across the House would disagree with those points; it is about having good law and good legislation, and we are all part of that system.

My third point is about the social value of landlords. Both the shadow Minister and the Secretary of State made exactly the same point: they expressed the value of landlords in the housing mix. We have to remember that, because without landlords out there providing houses, our housing market would be a lot worse off. We therefore also have to ensure that under the rights of property ownership, which this place has protected over the years in many different forms, we are clear about the grounds for eviction. I do not think that it is controversial to ask for evictions on the basis of a breach of contract, persistent late payment or damage to property. We have to be clear about those things.

No Member who has spoken in the debate, which has been broadly co-operative, wants people to be homeless or to live in bad housing, but we have to be absolutely clear about what we are asking of tenants and landlords. We have to provide reassurance and ensure that we are incentivising the long-term rental market. By the way, we could also look at reinstituting section 24 mortgage rate relief, but that may be a debate for another time. We have to ensure that we are not pushing houses back into short-term lets, that we are creating a transparent legal system, and that we are looking after the value of tenants and landlords in equal measure. As I said at the beginning, this framework is welcome, but unfortunately there is more work to be done.

**Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab)**: Like my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), I begin by informing the House that I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association. I am also a parliamentary ambassador for PricedOut, the campaign for affordable housing.

Let us give credit where it is due: the Government deserve praise for bringing the Bill forward at last. It has the potential to be transformational, bringing renters much needed additional security. However, if, as the Government statement on Friday seemed to suggest, Ministers are planning to delay indefinitely introducing the ban on section 21 evictions, the Bill will be a huge missed opportunity. Regardless of that issue, if the Bill is to reach its full potential, it must be strengthened significantly and its many outstanding loopholes must be firmly closed.

One such area of concern is notice periods. As we have heard, the Bill retains a two-month notice period when tenants receive an eviction notice on the grounds of landlord need. But with rents at their highest levels since records began and housing in chronically short supply, it is, as Shelter has argued, almost impossible for many tenants to find a suitable property to move into in just eight short weeks.

We must also remember in this debate that, according to the charity Crisis, the loss of a private tenancy is the leading cause of homelessness in the UK. Short notice periods—along, of course, with no-fault evictions—contribute to that, resulting in a disastrous situation for the individual involved and huge expense for the taxpayer. I hope to hear from the Minister why she believes that two months is enough time for tenants to relocate in such a difficult housing market.

I turn to fault-based evictions. I have significant concerns, which I hope can be addressed during the passage of the Bill. One is ground 14, which, as it stands, proposes widening the definition of antisocial behaviour to cover any behaviour capable of causing nuisance or annoyance. Mr Deputy Speaker, every Member of this House has the capability to cause nuisance or annoyance—and many of us do it frequently in this Chamber. How on earth could we stop a rogue landlord from exploiting such an extremely broad definition? They could make a false claim about a tenant's capacity to cause antisocial behaviour and evict them simply to hike up the rent.

Protections must be built into the system to avoid section 21 evictions through the back door. What safeguards are in place specifically to stop victims of domestic abuse from facing eviction on antisocial behaviour grounds? Do we really want those who suffer at the hands of their abusers to lose their homes as well? There is much work to be done in this area.

Another reason for fault-based evictions, of course, is rent arrears. Again, no one denies that such evictions can be reasonable in certain circumstances, but safeguards for the vulnerable are vital and a sensible balance is needed. Ground 8A means that someone needs to have been in two months' worth of rent arrears for just one day on three occasions to be liable for eviction. As we all know from our own casework, rent arrears can arise for a variety of reasons: unexpected bills, illness, redundancy. In a cost of living crisis, tenants could well find themselves falling foul of ground 8A through no fault of their own.

I will be interested to hear from the Minister what assessment the Government have made of the impact of making ground 8A evictions discretionary rather than mandatory, so that, as in Scotland, the case would come before a judge who could evaluate whether the eviction was justified or a resolution between landlord and tenant could be found. That could help someone to stay in their home, protecting them from the devastation of homelessness.

The headline measure of the Bill should be the long-overdue ban on section 21, but delays in the court system will hold up that important measure for some time. None the less, other potentially positive steps include the proposed introduction of a private rented sector ombudsman and a property portal to which landlords must be signed up. Crucial to the effectiveness of those measures is the capacity of local authorities to enforce them. That is a significant concern given the cuts to local authority budgets since 2010 and the resultant hollowing-out of non-statutory services.

That is not the only area in which the capacity of local authorities is a significant worry. The Local Government Association has raised specific concerns about local authorities' ability to enforce compliance with the ban on landlords re-letting or remarketing their property within three months of using “landlord need” eviction grounds, as it appears in practice that that system would be wholly reliant on former tenants noticing that the property is back on the market after they have been evicted. Many landlords will surely chance their arm in that situation and put their property back on the market within the re-let period, so I encourage the Minister to consider whether that period should be longer, and what steps she might take to ensure that such a period is effectively monitored without tenants and former tenants having to put their head above the parapet and report a landlord who fails to comply with the law.

Notice periods, fault-based evictions, the use of ground 14, the rigidity of ground 8A—there is much work still to do on the Bill. I support it in principle, but I hope there is significant movement in Committee.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op)**: Let me first refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and declare that I am the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for renters and rental reform and am supported by Generation Rent.

It is almost hard to believe that the words “ban on no-fault evictions” will not be in the next Tory party manifesto. Those words have been in Queen's Speeches. The Tories have promised, but they have not delivered. Now we know, of course, that that is because there was an almighty fight on the Conservative Benches—a fight that is still going on by the sounds of it. To all the dodgy landlords and vested interests watching this debate, I say that if they delay the Bill and its implementation further—as has been rumoured today—the result will be rental reform at the very core of the next general election campaign, and when Labour is in government, legislation might well go even further beyond what some of those vested interests want.

Enough about the politics; let us get down to the Bill itself. Central to this legislation is the abolition of section 21 no-fault evictions, which have been the blight of renters for many years. The aim is to provide safe homes that allow renters to establish roots in the community and start families—that is lacking at the moment. I am concerned, however, that the vastly expanded grounds for eviction might undermine the very concept of the Bill. Under schedule 1, grounds 1 and 1A remain no-fault clauses. They are for the landlord moving themselves in or selling. To prevent potential abuse of those grounds, it is crucial that landlords provide unequivocal evidence of their intentions, including through solicitors, agents' letters or sworn statements to the court. After using those grounds, landlords should submit another statement within 16 weeks of possession, for example. Landlords who genuinely need to possess under those grounds have nothing to lose in making such legal declarations, and the clauses are useless without them.

There may be legitimate circumstances in which a ground is no longer relevant—someone might have been evicted but the landlord no longer wants to sell the property or have a family member move in, for example. Should that happen, reasonable compensation should be offered to the person who has been evicted. It is not fair to use the grounds and then say, “Whoopsie-daisy, I didn't realise that I couldn't sell.” There must be redress for the tenant who has been harmed.

Ground 6 allows for an eviction when the landlord is found to be at fault. Although I do not think that people who are unfit to be landlords should remain landlords, this ground penalises the tenants by discouraging them from co-operating with enforcement action. As such, we need either compensation for any no-fault eviction, or an administrative mechanism that keeps the tenant in the property but removes the landlord's day-to-day control for as long as that tenant wishes to remain.

Grounds 8 and 8A deal with tenants who are in arrears. While there are some protections for universal credit payments, there are no protections where the arrears are irregular under ground 8A. Arrears might be repeated but very short, and the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance has highlighted the risk that this poses to victims of domestic abuse. The courts need to have discretion; these clauses cannot be mandatory.

Lastly, ground 14 is one I have raised with the Minister. We need to ensure that antisocial behaviour is not an excuse for a section 21 eviction by the back door. Equally, the idea of a student eviction clause is very worrying; the National Union of Students does not support it, and I do not see how it could be practically enforced. I would want to see that idea fleshed out in Committee, or a pledge that it will be ditched.

I welcome the Government's inclusion of two methods of enforcement. The first is local government; the second, which is more encouraging, is the ombudsperson. I am pleased that the Secretary of State has agreed to look at merging the ombudspersons—we have too many at the moment—but we need to make sure that that ombudsperson has the authority to rectify matters in a timely manner, one that still allows people to go to the courts if they wish to pursue that method of redress.

It troubles me that the landlord's notice period has not been changed from two months. In my view, that notice period should be four months, and importantly, tenants should have the flexibility to move out during a notice period: if a tenant is given notice and moves out the next week, they should not be liable for two months' worth of rent. That seems wrong to me.

Turning to protection periods, tenants will have protection from eviction for the first six months of their tenancy. Currently, they have six months after they sign each new assured shorthold tenancy, meaning that long-term tenants might have fewer protections than they do at the moment. Renters need to be protected: one proposal is to give them two years' protection, which is a very good idea that we should explore in Committee.

On rent increases, we must ensure that we do not face a wave of economic evictions. Otherwise, what will happen is that the landlord will whack up the rent, and someone will have to move. The rental tribunal's decisions being tied to markets means that an increase will be considered valid if the final rent aligns with market rates in local areas. That is clearly unaffordable for the LHA rate, which is under 30%—I remind colleagues that in 2010, that rate was 50%. It has been decreased year after year, and we need to address that. The Bill is also in danger of failing to address the “no DSS” benefit discrimination and the rampant guarantor discrimination that happens all the time in the rental sector, as well as affordability checks, which are used as methods of economic discrimination. Those problems also need to be addressed in the Bill.

I am a fan of the theory behind the property portal, but I fear that it might end up being like the bad landlords list, which never really worked and was never enforced. I appreciate that there are fines for not registering a property, but those fines should be paid to the tenant, as is the case with the deposit protection schemes. That would encourage tenants to make sure that their landlord is registered—they would receive recompense if the landlord was not. We cannot have local authorities doing all the checking: they just do not have the resources at the moment. We need everyone to be able to support these reforms.

**Mrs Elphicke**: My co-chair of the APPG on this subject is making some very important points. Could he further develop the important principle of the tenant being compensated for some of the no-fault or other fines that he has mentioned?

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle**: I would love to, but we do not have much time. However, there needs to be some discussion about what compensation someone will be given if they are no-fault evicted: for example, should they be given two months' compensation, which could pay for a deposit and the first month's rent in their new property? If the landlord has not registered, and the tenant is then evicted because their landlord has failed to be a good landlord—which is, of course, one of the grounds—what compensation will that person receive, enabling them to move into new, decent accommodation? Their money is tied up in the deposit and in having paid the rent. There needs to be some serious thought about how we compensate tenants so that they can move on in the private rented sector. Some people have also said that the property portal might be a back-door way of getting rid of selective licencing, which would be a great mistake.

The real story of these reform methods is the work of tens of thousands of hard-working activists, advice workers, policy leaders and organisations up and down this country, many of them in the Renters Reform Coalition, to which I give much praise. We are close to significant reform, but we must be vigilant.

**Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab)**: Never a day goes by without a constituent, or more than one constituent, contacting me about problems they are having with their housing. In particular, my caseworkers and I have been startled in recent months by the number of people coming to us who have been served with section 21 notices. I will give just one example.

I was contacted just a few weeks ago by a family in my constituency who had been served both a section 21 notice and a section 13 notice of increasing the rent. The son in the family has epilepsy, asthma and autism, and he attends a local school where he has an education, health and care plan in place. The family cannot afford private rent, but with the social housing stock under so much pressure, they were terrified they would not find a home close enough to his school and to much-needed family support.

Many of my other constituents' stories reflect this one—families with disabled members who are distraught at losing their homes to landlords who are putting up the rents, making them beyond their reach. These are just some of the 70,000 households that have been unfairly evicted since the Government first promised that they would take forward this legislation. How many more of my constituents will be served a section 21 notice before this legislation not only gets on to the statute book, but becomes effective with the reforms to the justice system and the courts?

I have had so many constituents write to me asking us to press for this Bill to come forward, but I fear we will not have met their expectations and their hopes for the protection of tenants in the future, particularly in relation to section 21. There is no doubt that passing the Bill into law will be a vital step forward, but it needs to be effective as well. So the issues about the courts need to be resolved as a matter of urgency, and I hope that the Minister will address those in her closing comments.

I have some other serious reservations about how some of provisions will work in practice. Just on the issue of section 21 evictions, the new grounds for landlords to reclaim possession make it clear that they will be banned from re-letting their property only for three months after evicting a tenant. The kind of rent increases we are seeing today may well mean that repossession is still well worth it for a landlord, I am afraid. Furthermore, many of the families that come to me after receiving a section 21 notice are currently able to receive priority assistance from the council due to their risk of homelessness, but this Bill appears to remove the right to immediate help if families are served with a possession notice. In the absence of section 21, we desperately need this right to assistance to be reinstated as the Bill passes through its many stages.

Moving away from the specific issue of no-fault evictions, I am concerned about the Government's U-turn on the promise they made in the White Paper to introduce a requirement that privately rented homes meet the decent homes standard. There was some discussion of this in the opening statements, but I would like further assurance from the Minister in her closing remarks that the issue of decent standards, which are so much needed in private rented housing, will be urgently addressed and brought forward in this Bill.

Earlier this year, I heard from a constituent renting from a private landlord who was left without a cooker for three months of his tenancy, as well as having ongoing issues with his boiler and with rising damp, all of which he had attempted to take up with his landlord. We of course took up these issues locally to try to resolve the problems. In fact, he left the property before they were resolved, leaving the problems for the next tenant, as I understand it. However, at my constituent's request, I wrote to the Department on 8 August to ask what was being done to stop private landlords from leaving families in homes that are not up to standard, so he was sufficiently concerned to see this as a policy issue, not just an issue for himself. Unless councils are given greater enforcement powers to tackle a wider range of standards breaches, and the resources to deal with those in practical terms, I am concerned that renters such as my constituent will not be protected from landlords who fail to fulfil their responsibilities.

My constituents have also been writing to me about pets, and it is positive that there will be a right to request to have a pet. I hope that during the passage of the Bill we can define the phrase “unreasonably refused”, or I fear that too many renters will find it to be a right in name but not in practice.

The provisions in the Bill are desperately needed by my constituents and those of all hon. Members. I urge the Government to end the dithering and delay in enabling this Bill over the past five years. I also hope they will take the further steps that so many Members have identified and that are required to protect our constituents from homelessness and poor-quality housing.

**Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green)**: It is about time. It is nearly five years since promises were first made to tenants facing soaring rents, huge energy bills, cold and damp homes, and limited rights. We are now on our 15th Housing Minister since 2010, and the Government are fast running out of time to make good on the promises in the Bill. Unforgivably late though it is, the Bill is important and provides a genuine opportunity to move towards the most basic goal of creating fairer, greener homes. It is clear that the market has become over-commodified and grossly distorted. We have a generation who will never be able to earn enough to have a mortgage, and cannot even afford their rents now. Key workers are being forced out of the places they work in, families uprooted, children forced to move schools, revenge evictions for those who complain—the list goes on.

More people are becoming homeless following rising evictions from the private rented sector. Annual Government figures released recently show a 23% increase in people at risk of homelessness because of a section 21 no-fault eviction. I welcome this delayed but essential Bill, not least because Brighton and Hove is one of the most expensive cities to rent in outside London, with a large proportion of renters being ripped off on a long-term basis with no end in sight. Recent analysis shows that in our city rents have jumped by 47% since 2011, and wages have risen by 35%. To put that another way, since 2011, renters in Brighton and Hove paid £530 million more to landlords than if housing costs had matched wages.

There are some good principles and useful changes in the Bill, such as measures on security of tenure, a new ombudsman and so on, but there are also glaring loopholes and big omissions. In particular, the measures on rent increases are inadequate and rely on a resource-intensive and time-consuming appeals process that could see tenants worse off at the end of it, as the tribunal process includes a power to impose a higher rent than the one the tenant is appealing. At the very least that power needs to be removed. Indeed, Ministers need to go further and get to grips with the fact that many people simply cannot afford their rent as it stands.

Many of my constituents are paying massively more than 30% of their gross monthly income on housing costs. That is unsustainable and we need a conversation about a national system for rent controls with local flexibility. Such a system will need to be both bold and implemented gradually and fairly, introduced alongside a suite of policies to address the housing crisis, including a major increase in social house building and real support for community-led housing.

As well as tackling demand and sky-high rents, dealing with insecurity of tenure is vital, so it is right that the Bill contains measures for periodic tenancies, and to ban section 21 no-fault evictions, and that students in the general PRS are also included. As many have said, it is deeply concerning that last Friday the Government appeared to have kicked that part of the Bill down the road—who knows how long for?—by saying that they first need to fix the mess that they have made of the court delays. We need to know exactly when we can expect that part of the Bill to come back.

Even before last Friday's attack on the section 21 provision, there had been noises about a possible Government amendment to exclude students from the reforms. I remind the Secretary of State of his own White Paper, in which he says:

“It is important that students have the same opportunity to live in a secure home and challenge poor standards as others in the PRS.”

Well, I agree with that.

As well as ensuring that students remain included, we need to firmly shut another glaring loophole in the no-fault eviction ban. In the Bill, if a landlord seeks to sell or to move in themselves, they can issue a no-fault eviction notice and the no-let period after they use that exemption is just three months. That is too short and could easily be abused. For example, a landlord could evict tenants by saying they want to move in and re-let just 12 weeks later. That no-let period should be nearer 12 months. Good landlords genuinely using these exemptions would have nothing to fear from that.

I welcome the proposals for the portal, although I would like to see far more issues covered on it. That portal has real potential to improve enforcement of energy-efficiency standards and to ensure warm and dry homes. I was dismayed when the Prime Minister announced last month that he would be scrapping the updated minimum energy efficiency standards for private rented homes under the pretext of saving people from expensive upgrades. It is not hard-pressed tenants and families who will be required to upgrade their homes, but the landlords who would no longer be allowed to rent out cold and inefficient homes.

Private renters live in some of the leakiest homes in the UK, with more than a quarter of households living in fuel poverty. As the Climate Change Committee has observed, these regulations would have cut energy bills significantly—by around £325 a year on average at current prices. Ministers need to stop this false dichotomy between climate action on the one hand and costs on the other, and admit that, in cutting our emissions, we can also deliver warmer and more comfortable homes. The Government need to bring forward an amendment in Committee to require all privately rented homes to be energy performance certificate grade C by 2028 at the latest.

Finally, we know that the UK's inadequate housing stock is eroding not only people's budgets, but their health and wellbeing. The death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak in 2020 as a result of prolonged exposure to mould in his home environment was a terrible tragedy and an utter scandal in the social housing sector. It is frankly shocking that the decent homes standard still does not apply to private rented homes, with the Government admitting that almost one in four of those homes in the private rented sector would not meet this most basic standard.

The vague commitment for jam tomorrow while children breathe in dangerous mould today is simply not good enough. It is not good enough for the mum in Brighton who emails to say that her daughter has been coughing for two months because of the leaky, unsafe, insecure flat that she is desperate to leave. It is not good enough for my constituents who are ill from long-term exposure to mould, living with walls that are dripping wet and a permanent cough, or those whose rented accommodation was so bad that it was recently filmed by the BBC for their “Rip Off Britain” feature. Again and again in my constituency casework I hear about landlords who blame tenants for the problems caused by structural issues that the landlords have themselves ignored, such as the landlords who kept one family's £1,730 deposit to pay for mould removal and redecoration. That is frankly outrageous.

Will Ministers give us a timeframe for decent homes legislation and confirm that it will be in the King's Speech next month? Will they explain how the Government can possibly justify failing to ensure that all landlords are compelled to act on health hazards, such as damp and mould, in a timely manner? Will they act with urgency to apply Awaab's law to the private rented sector?

**Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab)**: The rights of renters is one of the biggest issues in Putney, Southfields and Roehampton, where the average rent for a two- bedroom flat is £3,900 a month. That is nearly £47,000 a year. Having a safe, secure and affordable private rental property is vital for Londoners, but the current broken system leaves too many renters insecure and powerless if they have an unscrupulous landlord. For too long there has been a power imbalance in favour of landlords over tenants, which is abused by bad landlords, and the Government have done nothing to fix that.

This market failure affects teachers, nurses, doctors, police and prison officers that I have spoken to. They find it very hard to live in south-west London under the current rental market, which makes it hard to recruit into our public services. The effects of this market failure are spilling out into all parts of our life. I thank the London Renters Union, Generation Rent, Shelter, Crisis and the Renters Reform Coalition for their tireless campaigning work to stand up for renters. It is appalling that it has taken so long to bring in this Bill. Since the Government first announced that they would take this legislation forward, people in 70,000 households have been unfairly evicted and threatened with homelessness because of the Government's delays.

I welcome the measures in the Bill that I believe will make a real difference to renters and start to fix the broken system. I welcome: ending all fixed-term tenancies and replacing them with periodic open-ended tenancies; the creation of an ombudsman that all private landlords must join; the property portal database to better inform landlords and tenants; the duty to provide information to tenants; and the right to request a pet—the most British of rights. But what I want to see most of all is the end of section 21 no-fault evictions, which are used by bad landlords to kick out tenants who ask for repairs or to hike up rents unjustifiably. I was kicked out of my own accommodation by a landlord who said he was going to sell off the property. After huge upheaval, I drove past a couple of months later to see that he had rented it out to different tenants.

Recent research from Citizens Advice found that a shocking 46% of those who complain about their conditions receive a section 21 notice within six months. That reminded me of a family whose door I knocked on, who were moving out. They said, “Goodbye—we are moving out of the area.” Their father, who was clearing out the house with them, said he was absolutely furious. They were a policeman and a nurse, and they had to leave our area because they had complained about the poor state of repair of their house and had been served with a section 21.

I think of another family with children aged six, 12 and 15 who have spent the past four years in a flat that has been damaging to their health, suffering from structural damage, deep-rooted mould and a growing mouse infestation. They asked their landlord to carry out essential repairs and were served with a section 21 notice in return.

**Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op)**: One of my constituents was served with a section 21 no-fault eviction notice on their house: a single parent to two vulnerable children with additional needs whom she had adopted from care after being removed from a situation of domestic abuse. She could not afford to rent any other private property on her single income as she found them to be far too expensive. She has been left to join the council waiting list and been rendered homeless. Is that not exactly why we need to deal with this issue in the Bill?

**Fleur Anderson**: We absolutely do. I very much welcome that intervention. We all have so many stories and know so many families for whom the Bill and ending section 21 evictions would make an enormous difference. It would also make for a more level playing field for those good landlords who are doing the right thing. I am therefore appalled that the Secretary of State is potentially pulling the rug from under the Bill by saying that no-fault evictions can only be ended once the courts are reformed. That is Conservative failure in the justice system compounding Conservative failure in housing. Who loses out? It is hard-working, rent-paying British people. I urge the Minister to give a clear timetable for putting those legal reforms in place so that the can is not just kicked down the road.

While I am pleased that the Bill sets out new stricter grounds for eviction, I remain concerned that it does not go far, or fast, enough. First, the Bill has taken too long; the Government must speed up its delivery. About 290 Londoners face no-fault evictions each week, so every six months of delay in the Bill will mean another 15,000 more Londoners will face no-fault evictions. We do not have time. Secondly, there should be a requirement that private rented homes meet the decent homes standard. I have been calling for a Minister for mould for a long time.

Thirdly, provision to increase councils' investigative and enforcement powers is necessary. There needs to be funding for that as well; otherwise, we are shifting the problem from national to local government, which will need to shift around its resources and take funding from other areas.

Fourthly, there are loopholes that must be closed. Otherwise, section 21 could just continue by another name. Unscrupulous landlords could game the system and exploit the new grounds to sell an occupied property, so it is vital that a high level of evidence is required to demonstrate the intention to sell or occupy a property. The change to discretionary grounds from “likely” to “capable” of causing antisocial behaviour is open to so many varying interpretations that it will lead to inconsistent, unfair application, so it will not be the game changer in getting rid of antisocial behaviour that it could be.

Finally, preventing homelessness by preserving the private renter's right to access to homelessness assistance from their council as soon as a possession notice is served would be an essential addition to the Bill.

The Bill is a first step that only scratches the surface of what is needed to fix the housing emergency that the Conservatives have created. Mortgage bills and rents are soaring, fewer people are able to buy their own homes and more than a million people are stuck on social housing waiting lists, compounded by the threat of no-fault eviction were they to move into the private rented sector. More homes must be built.

While the Government have promised a rebalancing of the relationship between tenants and landlords, unless we see several amendments, the current crisis looks set to continue. The Bill is a good launching point, but Labour would significantly strengthen protections for private renters beyond its scope, so that good landlords can be assured of being on a level playing field, bad landlords will stop misusing their powers and tenants will finally be able to get the long-term security, rights and conditions that they deserve.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale)**: I call the ever-patient John McDonnell.

**John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab)**: As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and I know, always being called last means that we have the enjoyment of listening to the whole debate. Today's debate has been extremely valuable across the House, going into forensic detail on the Bill.

I want to make a plea for urgency, that is all. I welcomed the inclusion of this issue in the Conservative manifesto. In fact, I congratulated my then constituency neighbour, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge, on bringing it forward. I also accused him of plagiarism, because it was in our last two Labour manifestos. I congratulated him because, as many have reported today, my constituents are in a housing crisis. Most of the council housing has been sold off. To go on the housing waiting list, they must have lived in the area for 10 years, and they have to prove that with documentation, which many people cannot. Once on the housing waiting list, they will wait between three and five, maybe seven, years. Their children will have grown up by then.

Four thousand new properties are being built in the middle of my constituency, but there are barely any that my constituents will be able to afford, because the prices are so high and the wages in my constituency—despite high employment levels—are relatively low. Since 2010, rents have gone up on average by three times the rate of wage increases. In London alone, rents over the last year are up 15% on average. In some areas, they are up 20% to 25%. Basically, that means that people struggle to get a roof over their heads, whether from the council or rented, and certainly struggle for owner occupation. I do not know any firefighter, teacher or NHS worker in my constituency who lives there any more—they commute for miles because they cannot afford accommodation in the constituency.

People live in my constituency in slum conditions: damp, cold, unsafe and mouldy, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson). I have the phenomenon of beds in sheds. In my office, we have a moral dilemma about whether we tell the council that someone is living in a shed, because we know that if we do, enforcement comes in and that person is then homeless, with nowhere to go whatsoever.

As has been said throughout the debate, as soon as people complain about the conditions or rents, the landlords bring in section 21. That is why it was right for the Conservatives to include the Bill in their last manifesto, and I welcomed it. Landlords always use the excuse that they are moving in a relative. We would need genetic link mapping to identify the relationship between some of the tenants who move in and the family. Landlords might say that they are selling the property but, as has been said, when we tour around, we see that in fact they have not: within days, the “To let” board goes up. They scam us all the time.

My constituents live in fear of complaining at all because they know that if they do, many of them will lose their properties. It is correct that the majority of landlords are good, but it is the rogue landlords that I fear the Bill does not address.

**Mr Fysh**: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that, in London, part of the problem is that the amount of rental property available for new renters on the market is 20% down? It is important to encourage good landlords, as he talked about, to have longer rental periods. Should we incentivise them to do that through things such as tax breaks?

**John McDonnell**: Look, the major problem is that we are not building enough council houses. On the Conservative Benches a couple of Members referred to Harold Macmillan. Harold Macmillan took on from Clem Attlee a huge housing programme and built council houses. My family was a beneficiary of that. We moved out of a slum and into a council house. We just need to build more council houses. We cannot rely on the private market, because it profiteers. In my constituency, landlords can make a profit by leaving the property empty because the price will always go up, and sometimes they do not want to be encumbered by a tenancy. When tenants complain, they get kicked out and are made homeless. In my constituency, people have been pushed all around the country. I have people living in a Travelodge in Slough. They have to bring their children into Hayes each day, which takes an hour and a half. Then there is temporary accommodation with poor conditions and hostels. We have children being brought up in temporary accommodation. I looked at the figures: 131,000 children are now living in temporary accommodation.

I fully support the Bill's getting rid of section 21, but the problem is exactly as my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) said. The sanctions and conditions will render it totally ineffective. Landlords will simply take a three-month hit and then rent it out straight after that. And to rely on the court system! We have to be honest with one another. The Government have closed 300 county courts. There was a cut of 35% in the Justice budget over the last period. In addition, if we are looking to local authorities to enforce, nearly 20 local authorities are under section 114 notices. In other words, they are bankrupt and do not have the staff to do the enforcement. To be frank, in many areas now the lack of access to basic legal advice—not legal aid, but basic legal advice—from local law centres is non-existent. My citizens advice bureau, bless it, works so hard, but it is rushed off its feet so it cannot provide sufficient advice on the scale that is needed.

My plea is for urgency. We have had a really good debate, a forensic analysis of the Bill: the detail and the beneficial elements, but also the gaps and the need for change and amendment. I hope the Committee will, on Report, bring back a significantly amended Bill that will scrap section 21—that is what both parties promised in our manifestos at the last election, and I believe that other political parties did exactly the same. There is unanimity in this House to scrap section 21, but we must do it with a sense of urgency and we must do it effectively.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale)**: I call the Opposition Front- Bench spokesman.

**Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab)**: It is a pleasure to close this Second Reading debate for the Opposition, and I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who have spoken in it. It has been a good debate and one defined by a great many thoughtful and eloquent contributions.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) so rightly argued in her remarks at the outset, this is a piece of legislation that is shamefully overdue. As she and other speakers pointed out, not only is it now over four and a half years since the Government first pledged to abolish section 21 no fault evictions, but, for reasons that now appear quite clear, Ministers sat on the Bill for a further five months subsequent to its publication in May. Drawing attention to the lengthy delay in bringing the Bill forward is not simply a parliamentary debating point. As many of my hon. Friends, including my hon. Friends the Members for Putney (Fleur Anderson), for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson), for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) and for Blaydon (Liz Twist) pointed out, it has had very real consequences for private renters across the country.

During the years that Ministers prevaricated and the months this year they clearly spent negotiating with the discontented on their own Benches, tens of thousands of renters have been pushed to financial breaking point by multiple rent rises or threatened with homelessness as a result of being served a section 21 notice. We will continue to justifiably bemoan the fact that the Government have not acted with the urgency that was required, but we do welcome the Bill's finally progressing. I want to take the opportunity to thank once again, on behalf of those on the Labour Benches, all organisations, particularly the 20 that comprise the Renters Reform Coalition, for not only making the case for change over many years, but for joining Labour over recent months in urging Ministers to get on with the process of turning the Bill into law.

The case for fundamentally reforming the private rented sector is as watertight as they come, and Labour has called for it for many years. More than 11 million people in England—not just the young and the mobile but, now, many older people and families with children—live day in, day out with the knowledge that they could be uprooted from their home with little notice and minimal justification, and a significant minority of them are forced to live in substandard properties for fear that a complaint would lead to an instant retaliatory eviction. Such a situation cannot possibly be justified.

The sector should have been transformed a long time ago. Its regulation should have been overhauled to level the playing field between landlord and tenant decisively. The Bill is a good starting point to that end, and, as the debate has made clear, the principle of it enjoys broad support across the House. General support has been expressed today for the White Paper proposals that have found their way into it, including a new property portal and ombudsman, a simpler tenancy structure, the end of rent review clauses, prohibitions on multiple in-year rent increases, the right to request keeping a pet, and, of course, the abolition of section 21 notices.

However, as nearly all Opposition Members mentioned, a significant degree of uncertainty now surrounds the implementation of the promised section 21 abolition as a result of a concession made by Ministers to appease a minority of disgruntled Conservative Members—seemingly without complete success, given the tone and content of the contributions of the right hon. Members for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) and for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and the hon. Members for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) and for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher).

As we have heard, the Government have made it clear in recent days—although it would seem that Members were told two weeks ago—that section 21 notices will not be phased out until Ministers judge that

“sufficient progress has been made to improve the courts.”

Explicit reference was made to end-to-end digitisation of the process, which could well take a great many years to achieve. Private renters across the country, who have been assured repeatedly by Ministers that the passage of this Bill will finally remove the threat of a section 21 eviction, have no guarantee whatsoever that the concession made does not amount to an effective deferral of that change well beyond the phased transition already provided for by the Bill.

If this sounds all too familiar, that is because it is. The Secretary of State has form when it comes to acquiescing in damaging concessions rather than facing down the unruly Benches behind him, with future housing supply in England a notable past casualty.

After 13 years of Tory government, the courts system is on its knees. The Government have had more than four and a half years, since they committed themselves to abolishing section 21 evictions, to make significant improvements to it in order to support good-faith landlords, and they have not succeeded. As things stand, HMCTS does not expect to be able to deliver even the reduced-scope reform programme to its current timetable. Given this Government's record, why on earth should renters take it on trust that things will improve markedly any time soon? The inefficiency of the courts system is a huge problem, and action must be taken to address its lack of capacity so that landlord possession claims can be expedited, but the end of no-fault evictions cannot be made dependent on an unspecified degree of future progress subjectively determined by Ministers. In the absence of very clear commitments from the Minister on metrics and timelines in this respect, we will seek to amend the Bill in Committee to ensure that it is not.

While Ministers face the prospect of having to give further ground as the Bill progresses to keep their Back Benchers onside, Labour will work in Committee to see it strengthened so that it truly delivers for tenants. We will press for clarification of the new grounds for possession for students' landlords to ensure that they are not too expansive, and will probe the Government's intentions in respect of dealing with the complexities of the student market. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) and the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), rightly called for that.

We will put forward a number of sensible changes, including an increase in the proposed notice periods from two months to four months to protect renters better. I am pleased that my hon. Friends the Members for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) and for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) argued for that. We will press the Government to reconsider their position on a range of White Paper proposals that did not make it into the Bill. They include measures to strengthen councils' enforcement powers—I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) and for Blaydon for raising that point—along with powers to limit the amount of advance rent that landlords can ask for, and provisions to expand rent repayment orders to cover repayment for non-decent homes.

We will explore why essential reforms that were outlined in the White Paper, including the proposed legally binding decent homes standard and the proposed ban on landlords refusing to rent to those in receipt of benefits or with children—a point powerfully made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East—are not on the face of the Bill. We will explore what more might be done to ensure that the separate measures that have been promised to enact each of those reforms are passed and applied quickly and effectively. We will also look to amend various provisions in the Bill relating to new and revised grounds for possession, including the far too sweeping and punitive proposed new mandatory ground 8A and the proposed change to discretionary ground 14 relating to antisocial behaviour, so that blameless and vulnerable tenants are properly safeguarded.

Perhaps most importantly, we will seek to close the numerous loopholes in the Bill that would allow the minority of disreputable landlords—such as the unscrupulous owner of Dorchester Court mentioned in the powerful contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes)—to exploit tenants and jeopardise their security of tenure. Let us take two examples that are featured prominently in the Bill. Even with the proposed expanded right to challenge, it is far from clear that the tribunal system would prevent significant numbers of tenants from being evicted by means of an extortionate rent hike. We need to explore what more can be done to put in place genuinely effective means of redress for them. Similarly, the proposed three-month ban on landlords re-letting properties they have taken back to sell or move into themselves is not only insufficient but appears not to apply in some circumstances and will almost certainly be impossible to enforce even when it does. We need to tighten it.

The Bill is shamefully overdue but imperative. We support it in principle and are pleased that it will progress today, but it needs to be enhanced rather than undermined by concessions aimed at placating a minority of Members. Private renters deserve a piece of legislation that will ensure that they have real security and enjoy better rights and conditions in short order. We are willing to work constructively with the Government on the Bill, but make no mistake, we plan to do everything in our power to see it strengthened to the benefit of private renters who have waited long enough for meaningful change.

**The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean)**: It is a huge pleasure to deliver the closing speech today on the Second Reading of the Government's Renters (Reform) Bill, and I begin by thanking Members across the House for their valuable, thoughtful and knowledgeable contributions to the debate. I have enjoyed and noted the contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke), the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts)—the Chair of the Select Committee —my right hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker), the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt), whom I thank for all his work across a range of all-party parliamentary groups, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson), my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson), the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield)—I would be very happy to meet him and his APPG—and my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), who will know about all the work we are doing to help address the second home issue in his constituency. He has spoken to me about that on a number of occasions.

I also thank the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) for the support from the Liberal Democrat Front Bench. I declare an interest similar to that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), as I have four children in their 20s who are renting in London. I know at first hand of the issues that they and their friends face, and that is why I am so convinced that this Bill is the right thing to do for the next generations of our children and grandchildren.

**Mr Betts**: The Minister's children are in their 20s, but we want to make sure that they are not in their 30s before the Bill actually comes into effect, so will she give us a clear time when the courts will be ready for the Bill to be active in the Government's view?

**Rachel Maclean**: I will come on to that precise point, if the hon. Member will allow me.

I want to thank the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms), the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) and my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), whom I will be happy to meet again, as requested. I also thank the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana), my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson) and the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). I am deeply concerned about the case she has raised with me and will continue to work with her. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), the hon. Members for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western), for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), for Blaydon (Liz Twist), for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) and for Putney (Fleur Anderson), and the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell).

It is right to say at this point that we are committed to honouring the manifesto commitment that we made in 2019 to create a private rented sector that works for everyone and to level up housing quality in this country. I am grateful to all hon. and right hon. Members who continue to engage constructively with us on the provisions in the Bill so that we can deliver the change needed to create a fairer rental market for both tenants and landlords. Of course, I echo the sentiment of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who said in his opening remarks that we will continue to work closely with Members to further hone and refine this legislation as it is put on the statute book.

**Several hon. Members rose—**:

**Rachel Maclean**: I will make progress, because I have limited time and I must address the points that have been put to me.

First, it is right that antisocial behaviour is a discretionary ground. Judges must decide on the circumstances of a case. Having formerly been Minister with responsibility for safeguarding and domestic abuse, I completely understand the importance of taking such serious issues into account and striking the right balance between tenants and landlords. I was asked whether local authorities will have funding to carry out their enforcement duties. Of course they will have that new burdens funding, as they would with any Government legislation.

I was asked about blanket bans on benefit claimants and families with children, and I make it very clear that we are committed to outlawing the unacceptable practice of such blanket bans. We are carefully considering how to get these measures right. This is a significant reform, as I think all Members understand. We must do it in the right way, while ensuring that landlords rightly have the final say on who they rent their properties to.

**John McDonnell**: Will the Minister give way?

**Rachel Maclean**: I will give way to Members if I have time, but please allow me to make my points.

There have been many questions about the ombudsman. We need simplicity and clarity for landlords and tenants. It is important to say that this Bill does not, in itself, establish a new ombudsman. An existing ombudsman could do the job and, again, we are looking at that very carefully to make sure we get the right solution for this vital part of our regulatory reforms.

I am grateful that many Members have welcomed the point about pets, and I agree that we are a nation of animal lovers. Again, this is about reasonableness. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle is exactly right—the circumstances she set out would constitute a reasonable ground for refusal, but we need to look carefully at how this works.

The decent homes standard has been raised again, and it is a key part of our reforms. We must make sure that the new system we introduce means people are living in decent, safe and warm homes. Everyone in this House will be under no illusion about how importantly this Government take this issue, as they can see the work that has been introduced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to tackle these issues, which have laid unresolved for many years. This Government brought in groundbreaking reforms in the social rented sector, and we will do so in the private rented sector to give tenants the same protections.

It is important to note at this point that the vast majority of possession claims do not end up in the courts—only something like 1% of claims go through the courts. In my capacity as Housing Minister, I work closely with the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), who is responsible for His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service. There is a wide-ranging programme of reform in the court system.

The courts have already made huge improvements. It is worth saying that over 95% of hearings are listed within four to eight weeks of receipt, and of course the ombudsman will encourage the early dispute resolution process, taking a lot of claims out of the courts and freeing up court time for more complex processes. When we bring in this reform, however, it is right that we ensure landlords have confidence in the justice system because, as everybody has pointed out, if we do not have good landlords in this country who have confidence in the systems that underpin the justice system, we will not have the rented homes in every constituency that our country needs.

We have always committed to aligning and synchronising the reform of the private rented sector with the court system; we note that that was a recommendation of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee. We do not think that a housing court is the right way to do that; nor is that the view of the sector or of the stakeholders, with whom we have engaged in huge detail. This work remains a priority for our Department and for the Ministry of Justice. We want to see landlords being offered a digital process for possession on all grounds.

**Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con)**: If the Bill's Second Reading receives widespread support because it will rightly ditch no-fault evictions of tenants without triggering an exodus of private sector landlords, that will in no small part be down to the hard work, for which I am very grateful, of Ministers including my hon. Friend. While she is looking at what is a reasonable speed to resolve antisocial behaviour claims in the courts, will she confirm that it is the Government's firm intention to fulfil our manifesto commitment and implement the Bill as soon as possible?

**Rachel Maclean**: I thank my hon. Friend very much. I can absolutely give him that assurance.

**Mr Fysh**: Does the Minister accept that if the Country Land and Business Association's estimate is correct that the Bill may reduce the available private rentals by 40% in rural areas, that could have a completely deleterious effect on the Prime Minister's main pledge, which is to get inflation down? Core inflation is driven by rentals. Will the Minister work with me to fix the Bill and ensure that that does not eventuate?

**Rachel Maclean**: I am very happy to work with my hon. Friend on this and many other issues, but it is important that I say that we have done considerable analysis. There is no evidence, such as the estimate that he has just pointed to, that the Bill will lead to landlords leaving the sector, but it is right that any policy that the Government bring in is based on evidence. That will always be our approach.

**John McDonnell**: Will the Minister give way?

**Rachel Maclean**: I want to wind up now, because I cannot detain the House any longer. I assure right hon. and hon. Members that we are focused on introducing this groundbreaking once-in-a-generation reform. I commend the Bill to the House.*Question put and agreed to.Bill accordingly read a Second time.*

Renters (Reform) Bill (Programme)*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),*

That the following provisions shall apply to the Renters (Reform) Bill:*Committal*

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.*Proceedings in Public Bill Committee*

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 5 December 2023.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.*Consideration and Third Reading*

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.*Other proceedings*

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.*—(Andrew Stephenson.)Question agreed to.*

Renters (Reform) Bill (Money)*King's recommendation signified.Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),*

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Renters (Reform) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(a) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State; and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.*—(Andrew Stephenson.)Question agreed to.*

Renters (Reform) Bill (Ways and Means)*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),*

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Renters (Reform) Bill, it is expedient to authorise:

(1) the charging of fees under or by virtue of the Act; and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—*(Andrew Stephenson.)Question agreed to.*

Renters (Reform) Bill (Carry-over)*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 80A(1)(a)),*

That if, at the conclusion of this Session of Parliament, proceedings on the Renters (Reform) Bill have not been completed, they shall be resumed in the next Session.—*(Andrew Stephenson.)Question agreed to.*

Petition

[Source](https://hansard.parliament.uk/undefined/2023-10-23/debates/E9FEB6DF-B896-4579-918F-8E99F7A35AAD/web)

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